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Secular Learning in a Spiritual Environment

Diligence and obedience allow the spirit and the mind to work together to discover, understand, and integrate truth in its various spheres.

Merrill J. Bateman

Twenty-five years ago, I arrived on the campus of Brigham Young University as a newly recruited economics professor. I had received a Ph.D. from one of the more respected graduate programs in the country, completed my military obligation, and was now embarking on an academic career. A few months later, I received a telephone call from a faculty member in another department. The person introduced himself, welcomed me to campus, and then asked if I would answer some questions from a survey he was taking. Although I was somewhat surprised by the call, I agreed. He then asked, "What brand of economics do you teach? Do you subscribe to increased governmental controls for the United States economy? Do sacred truths have any relevance in economic modeling, and do they influence your teaching in the classroom?"

My graduate training helped me answer the first two questions, but I confess that I had trouble with the third. My graduate training had emphasized that the well-being of a nation depends on freedom to trade, freedom to choose, information flows, the development of technology, and the specialization of the factors of production. I also knew that the most efficient combinations of the above require free markets. When government controls are imposed, market signals are disturbed, and efficiency is reduced, causing a reduction of goods and services. Consequently, I understood that capitalism was a much more productive system than socialism or communism.

On the other hand, I understood some economists' concerns regarding capitalism. Some economists believe that capitalism leads to a severely skewed distribution of income. Some members in a free market society may be wealthy while others starve. Advocates of socialism and other forms of market control defend governmental interference on the grounds that income will be more equitable. They argue that inequality is too high a price to pay for an efficient system. Many economists consider efficiency and equity to be mutually exclusive goals.

At that time, such equity arguments concerned me, but I felt strongly that the costs of a socialistic system were too high. Evidence is even clearer today that the loss of economic freedom also brings the loss of political and religious freedoms. In such an economic system, skewed incomes continue, only at a much lower level. But the idea that a sacred truth or principle might resolve the conflict between efficiency and equity had never entered my classroom presentations.

Although the caller's questions might have been asked in a friendlier atmosphere, I have been grateful these many years that the questions were asked and that the last one was disconcerting to me. It forced me to think about the relationship between secular and sacred truths. I noticed that I had compartmentalized my search for secular truth apart from my search for spiritual understanding. Until then, the processes seemed separate and distinct. I had asked the Lord to help me master secular material as I approached examinations as a student and as I entered the classroom as a teacher. But I had never thought about receiving new economic insights as a result of combining scientific and spiritual methods of searching. Did the Lord's instructions to Oliver Cowdery to "study it out in your mind, then . . . ask me if it be right" (D&C 9:8) apply to secular as well as spiritual truth? Was it possible to extend Alma's injunction to "cry . . . in your fields, yea, over all your flocks" (Alma 34:20) to include economic knowledge? After all, economics was my field. Could a spiritual environment increase the rate of learning and the probability of discovering new secular truths? Are secular truths related to spiritual truths? What are the laws governing the acquisition of knowledge and intelligence? What constitutes a spiritual environment? Is it within each person? In one's search for secular truth, what happens if one

abides the conditions that enhance the search for sacred truths? Could spiritual truth resolve secular paradoxes? These and other questions flooded my mind over the years and provide the basis for my presentation.

What Is Truth—Absolute or Relative?

The Lord told Joseph Smith that “truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come” (D&C 93:24). The Lord further states that “truth abideth and hath no end” (D&C 88:66) and “intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be” (D&C 93:29). If truth is a statement of reality, if truth abides and has no end, and if the manifestation of truth (intelligence) was not created or made, then truth is eternal. There are absolute truths!

As President Spencer W. Kimball stated in a 1977 Brigham Young University devotional:

There are . . . absolute truths which are the same yesterday, today, and forever—never changing. These absolute truths are not altered by the opinions of men. . . . We learn about these absolute truths by being taught by the Spirit. These truths are “independent” in their spiritual sphere and are to be discovered spiritually, though they may be confirmed by experience and intellect (see D&C 93:30). . . . God our Heavenly Father—Elohim—lives. That is an absolute truth. All . . . of the children of men on the earth might be ignorant of him and his attributes and his powers, but he still lives. All the people on the earth might deny him and disbelieve, but he lives in spite of them. . . . And Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Almighty, the Creator, the Master of the only true way of life—the gospel of Jesus Christ. . . . That is an absolute truth; there is no gainsaying.¹

God placed truths in different spheres as the scriptures indicate. As a consequence, there are the sacred truths of the gospel, but also there are truths of mathematics, physics, chemistry, the social sciences, and so on. These secular laws or principles describe the workings of this world. In the search for absolute truth, science often is not able to observe all data or appreciate all the relationships involved. Consequently, scientific discoveries may approach the threshold of truth but not lay claim on the whole truth. Therefore, discovered “truths” are subject to change. This is relative knowledge. Relative knowledge is an approximation of reality or statements based on incomplete information. When scientists attempt to

discover truth in the secular realm, they formulate a hypothesis that relates causes and effects, gather data, and then test the hypothesis. In experiments conducted to determine the accuracy of the hypothesis, scientists invariably add an error term to their models to represent the unknown factors or influences that may have been omitted from the hypothesis. If the test reveals a small error term, scientists will have more confidence in the “truth” they are trying to establish. However, the error term rarely equals zero, which would imply the discovery of an absolute truth. If the error term is large, the hypothesis is normally rejected, and scientists reformulate the hypothesis and begin the testing procedure again.

All absolute truth is consistent. In the Lord’s words, “truth embraceth truth” and “light cleaveth unto light” (D&C 88:40). When a scientist uses secular methods to discover law that appears to be inconsistent with gospel truths, I suggest that not all truth about the earthly law is known. What appears to be inconsistent in two or three dimensions as discovered by the scientist will be harmonized eventually by additional knowledge in “n” dimensions. Spiritual truth forms a continuum with gospel truths at the higher end of the scale. Knowledge of and obedience to gospel truths are critical for salvation, but all truth is useful and important for mankind. The application of secular truth produces the benefits of faster transportation, more efficient communication methods, time-saving devices, etc. If wisely used, scientific truth will improve humans’ health and well-being and will aid the Lord’s servants in spreading the gospel.

But all truth, both relative and absolute, is spiritual. As the Lord says, “All things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law [truth] which was temporal” (D&C 29:34). Since all truth is spiritual, the conditions and process for discovering “secular” truth must be similar to the requirements established by the Lord for understanding revealed truth. What are the Lord’s conditions for obtaining knowledge and intelligence, and do they apply to secular learning?

The Lord’s Requirements for Discovering Gospel Truths

Two principles govern the acquisition of truth and intelligence. They are *diligence* and *obedience* (compare Alma 12:9).

Diligence may be defined as energetic application or mental exertion. The scriptures state:

Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection. And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come. (D&C 130:18-19)

In the gospel context, faith requires diligence. Joseph Smith stated: “When a man works by faith he works by mental exertion instead of physical force.”² Diligence is one of the laws of heaven that determines the knowledge and intelligence that may be acquired by the earnest truth seeker. Will God bless people disproportionately to their mental effort or faith? No! That would violate an eternal principle. Learning by faith is not an easy road or a lazy means to gaining understanding.

Obedience is the second requirement for finding truth. In a gospel context, obedience brings faith. A new investigator of the gospel must act on the desire to believe by planting the seed, repenting, studying, and seeking the Lord in prayer. Because gospel truths are of a high spiritual order, they are confirmed through the Holy Spirit. In order to receive a witness from the Holy Ghost regarding the truthfulness of gospel principles, one must be striving to live in accordance with gospel truths. One must be living up to the light that is within oneself. This is consistent with Paul’s teaching:

Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. (1 Cor. 2:9-11)

The Principles of Diligence and Obedience Apply to the Discovery of Secular Truth

Again, all truth is spiritual in nature, revealed through the light of Christ. This is the light that “lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9) and is

the same light that quickeneth your understandings; Which light proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of

space—The light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed. (D&C 88:11-13)

As President N. Eldon Tanner stated in general conference, “We learn from the scriptures that all truth is revealed through the light of Christ. . . . Thus, the *truths* discovered by such men as Sir Isaac Newton, Thomas Edison, and Albert Einstein were actually revealed to them through the light of Christ.”³

Because all truth comes through the light of Christ, seekers of secular truth must follow the Lord’s requirements for discovering gospel truths. Diligence or mental exertion is one of the requirements that must be followed by seekers of secular truth. Scientists study the problem, saturate their minds with it, puzzle over it, and dream about it. Albert Sabin and Jonas Salk spent years searching for a vaccine to immunize people from contracting poliomyelitis. A reporter wrote that once Sabin focused on a problem, he was tenacious and would not let go. He had a voracious appetite for work—for mental exertion.⁴

What about obedience? What is the level of obedience required for the discovery of secular truth? Again, the answer is that everyone must live according to the light they have. When one is seeking a witness of gospel truth and is being taught those truths, one must plant the seed of faith and live according to the higher truths. When one is seeking secular truth, the revealer is the light of the “spirit of man” (1 Cor. 2:11). Thus the scientist must be striving to live according to the light within him so that new light will cleave to the old. Generally the obedience required in receiving secular truth is of a terrestrial order.

To illustrate the role of the light of Christ, consider the common description of many secular discoveries. After studying, puzzling, and dreaming about the problem, the scientist often finds progress stopped, blocked by a seemingly impenetrable wall. Then at last and suddenly, as if out of nowhere, comes a flash of light, the answer to his quest. Recall James W. Cannon’s explanation regarding his discovery of how to unknot an infinitely knotted object in high dimensional space—a topology problem in mathematics. After pushing the problem around for many difficult weeks, the solution came:

One night at 2:00 A.M., my eyes suddenly popped open. I sat up in bed. . . . I knew how to extend Štan’ko’s techniques [a solution to

the infinitely knotted object]. I do not know how the answer came to me. I couldn't sleep. I dressed quietly and went walking on the dark streets of Madison. . . . I checked the ideas for all of their consequences. I checked for absurdities. I couldn't find any. The picture was wonderful.⁵

Parley P. Pratt, one of the original twelve Apostles in this dispensation, explained the spiritual reasons for such inspiration. He wrote:

When the outward organs of thought and perception are released from their activity, the nerves unstrung, and the whole of mortal humanity lies hushed in quiet slumbers, in order to renew its strength and vigor, it is then that the spiritual organs are at liberty, in a certain degree, to assume their wonted functions, to recall some faint outlines, some confused and half-defined recollections, of that heavenly world, and those endearing scenes of their former estate, from which they have descended in order to obtain and mature a tabernacle of flesh. . . . Spirit communes with spirit, thought meets thought, soul blends with soul, in all the raptures of mutual, pure, and eternal love.⁶

In addition to flashes of insight and the usual procedures of study, observation, and experimentation, truth even comes by accident. Aspartame, the nonnutritive sweetener known as Nutra-sweet, was discovered by a chemist in a lab when he accidentally allowed a kettle of amino acids mixed with an enzyme to boil over. In cleaning up the mess, the solution got on his hands and fingers. A short time later, he rubbed his lips with his fingers and noticed a sweet taste.⁷ Today, Nutrasweet is a multibillion dollar product.

Given that learning can take place both through study and faith, is Brigham Young University destined to be a leader among the world's institutions of higher learning in discovering secular truth as well as disseminating sacred truth? To the extent that this institution lives up to its mandate of providing a spiritual environment in which learning can take place, the answer is yes.

Spiritual Environment and Secular Learning

I define a spiritual environment as a place inhabited by people committed to living gospel truths. The community members are peculiar in that they are sensitive to spiritual things. They have access to the Holy Spirit because of their faith and works. Their

faith is based on a spiritual witness that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world and that he restored the Father's plan of salvation through the prophet Joseph Smith. Their faith is more than a testimony of belief; it is a force that propels them to action and provides them with power.

The members of this community are a consecrated people in that they bend their will to that of the Father's. Little disputation exists among them, and unity abounds. They understand that contention is not of Christ, but of Satan, who uses it to stir people to anger one with another. A spiritual environment is a place where respect for others is dominant, where people are honest, supportive, and slow to criticize and where scholars need not fear the motives of their colleagues. Because of faith, scholars do not fear the world. They want to learn from others—both inside and outside of their institution. However, their faith and knowledge of higher truths allow them to sift through secular ideas searching for consistency—for truth which embraces truth. Their faith also provides them with the patience to wait for additional knowledge when secular truth conflicts with eternal truth. The atmosphere which pervades the campus originates within each person. It reflects the quality of life lived by each inhabitant.

In this environment, the words of President Marion G. Romney will be proven:

I believe in study. I believe that men learn much through study. As a matter of fact, it has been my observation that they learn little concerning things as they are, as they were, or as they are to come without study. I also believe, however, and know, that learning by study is greatly accelerated by faith.⁸

If faith dominates the environment of this university, then secular learning will be enhanced. One should remember, however, that learning by faith depends on the principles of diligence and obedience. These principles are especially important in a spiritual environment because of the higher knowledge given. But when the principles are applied, scholars will link their mental searching with faith and discoveries will increase in frequency. I believe this process is well underway at Brigham Young University and will grow at a geometric rate. Both faculty and students are participating in this process as reflected in the major innovations

and knowledge that have come from the University in the last two decades. Surely, Brigham Young University will be one of the means by which the Lord uses Abraham's seed to bless the nations of the earth.

Integration of Truth

Let me provide two examples of how the Lord's principles for gaining spiritual truth can enhance the search for secular truth. The first is an example of a spiritual truth which solves the economic paradox of efficiency and equity. The second is an insight I received a few weeks ago that integrated one spiritual truth with another and allows me to bear witness of him whom we all serve.

For the first insight, I am indebted to Lindon J. Robison, who has published an article entitled "Economic Insights from the Book of Mormon."⁹ Robison points out that righteousness, including caring for others, is the solution to the conflict between economic equity and efficiency. He draws on the lessons taught in the Book of Mormon to illustrate that economic development occurs in a society when people are righteous and care about each other. Economic decline occurs when a nation falls into iniquity and the people become hardhearted and full of pride. When there is righteousness and caring, there is also unity and cooperation. Good feelings among people and nations allow for and increase trading activities. Trading allows workers to specialize and to share new technology.¹⁰ Moreover, when righteous people control the government (for example, King Benjamin and his son Mosiah), there is more freedom of choice and taxes are less burdensome. When the less caring take control (like King Noah), the tax burden increases.¹¹

Contrast the trading and specialization that occurred among the righteous people of Lib with the lifestyle of the wicked Jaredites. First, the story of Lib's people:

And they were exceedingly industrious, and *they did buy and sell and traffic one with another, that they might get gain.* And they did work in all manner of ore, and they did make gold and silver, and iron, and brass, and all manner of metals; . . . and they did have silks, and fine-twined linen; and they did work all manner of cloth. (Ether 10:22-24; italics added)

Now compare Lib's people with the Jaredites, whose wickedness caused their society to disintegrate:

Wherefore every man did cleave unto that which was his own, with his hands, and *would not borrow neither would he lend*; and every man kept the hilt of his sword in his right hand, in the defense of his property and his own life and of his wives and children. (Ether 14:2; italics added)

Professor Robison concludes that the supposed equity and efficiency paradox of modern economic theory is not supported. In fact, economic prosperity appears to be a companion of equity. He states:

The Book of Mormon message is that the distribution of income is based on the level of caring and unity among the people. Among the righteous, income is evenly distributed as are opportunities to progress. The distribution of income is simply a reflection of their unity. . . . By voluntarily redistributing their income to the poor, they were able to maintain an economic system that included incentives to work hard because of individual responsibility and rewards for efforts. Moreover, one of the reasons the caring work hard is that they desire to use the product of their work to bless the lives of others.¹²

By applying diligence and obedience to a sacred text revealed by the Lord, Professor Robison has gained truth that solves an important secular problem.

Finally, may I share an experience that occurred at a stake conference I attended as a visiting authority. This experience illustrates the integration of one spiritual truth with another. It was the Saturday evening session (they are almost always the best). The theme was "Keeping the Sabbath Day Holy." As I waited to give my talk, I felt prompted to tell a story my wife had recently shared with me. But I was uneasy because the story did not seem to connect with the theme. Because of the seeming inconsistency, I decided to ignore the prompting. But the prompting came again with more intensity. I asked myself, "How can the story of a little handicapped girl relate to keeping the Sabbath day holy?" And then a thought came, "Why do we celebrate the Sabbath?"

I wrestled with the last question and eventually discovered two answers. The first is that we keep the Sabbath day to celebrate the creation of this earth. The Lord set aside the seventh day to honor the fulfillment of a promise he made to his children

that he would create an earth or second estate where they could come and progress. And then another thought pressed upon my mind. The Sabbath day was changed from Saturday to Sunday following the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Christ. The change was effected to honor God's fulfillment of a second covenant—providing a Savior to open the door for us to return to his presence. Moreover, a meal was instituted and scheduled for each Sabbath day to remind us of those events. As I used my mental faculties to reflect on the Savior's atonement, I then understood my initial prompting and how Heather's story is consistent with honoring the Sabbath day.

Heather was born into an LDS family sometime in the late 1970s. A short time after the birth, her parents learned that she was physically handicapped and that her spirit would be housed in a body with great restrictions. As she grew, she was confined to a wheelchair, was unable to speak, and could send messages only with her eyes. A direct gaze with a widening of her eyes and a smile meant *yes*. A blink meant *no*. In spite of her handicaps, however, one could feel her vibrant spirit inside.

When old enough, Heather began to attend school, where her teacher was a therapist. One morning as Heather and the teacher visited about the prior weekend, the teacher learned that Heather had attended Primary on Sunday. The teacher then sang for Heather the Primary song "I Wonder When He Comes Again." The expression on Heather's face revealed the delight within her. When the song was finished, the teacher could tell that Heather wanted her to continue. After a few songs, the teacher asked Heather if she had a favorite song. Heather's direct gaze provided the answer and offered a challenge. Through a series of questions, the teacher learned that Heather's song was one she had heard in Primary. She wasn't sure which songbook it was in, but it was about Jesus. The teacher then sang every possible song she could think of. Unfortunately Heather's favorite did not appear, and Heather was not about to quit. For some reason, she needed to share her favorite song.

At the end of the day, the two were still unsuccessful, and the teacher agreed to bring a Primary songbook to school the next day. On the following day, the teacher and student went through all of the songs in the book, but to no avail. Finally, the teacher

suggested that Heather's mother might help her figure out which song it was. Heather came to school the next day with the new Church hymnbook tucked in her wheelchair. The teacher positioned herself next to Heather and, page by page, began making their way through the book singing the first phrase of each song. Page after page Heather's eyes would close in a definite no. Finally, halfway through the book, the teacher began to sing: "There is sunshine in my soul today . . ." Immediately, the little girl brightened and smiled. She looked directly at the teacher, and both began to laugh and rejoice. Success had finally come after a three-day search. As the teacher sang the first verse and began the chorus, Heather mustered all her effort and joined in with occasional sigh-like sounds. After finishing the first verse and chorus, the teacher asked if she wanted to hear the rest of the verses. Heather's eyes opened wide with a firm yes. Again the teacher began:

There is music in my soul today,
A carol to my King,
And Jesus listening can hear
The songs I cannot sing . . .¹³

The little girl's reaction to the third and fourth lines was so strong that the teacher stopped. As the reality and significance of the words pressed on the teacher's mind, she asked Heather if those lines were what she liked about the song. Could Jesus, listening, hear the songs she could not sing? Heather looked the teacher directly in the eyes, and testimony was borne.

Feeling guided by the Spirit, the teacher asked, "Heather, does Jesus talk to you in your mind and in your heart?" The child's look was penetrating. The teacher then asked, "Heather, what does he say?" The teacher's heart pounded as she saw the clear look in Heather's eyes as the little girl awaited the questions which would allow her to share her insights. The teacher then asked, "Does he say 'Heather, I love you'?" Her radiant eyes widened. The teacher paused and then said, "Does he say 'Heather, you're special'?" Again, yes. Finally, after a pause, the teacher asked, "Does he say, 'Heather, be patient; I have great things in store for you'?" Heather's head became erect, every fiber of her being seemed electrified as her eyes penetrated the teacher's soul. She knew she was loved; she knew she was special; she knew she only needed to be patient because great things were in store for her.¹⁴

Heather's story helped me to understand why we are asked to keep the Sabbath day holy. Through the Atonement, Jesus can hear the songs we cannot sing and has great things in store for us if we are patient. The Sabbath is a special day to remember his great gift to us.

May the Lord bless you in your search for both sacred and secular truth. May all of us honor him by being diligent and obedient in our efforts to learn and to serve him. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Merrill J. Bateman, former dean of the School of Management at BYU, is Presiding Bishop of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Shortly before this publication went to press, Bishop Bateman was made a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy and named president of Brigham Young University. This speech was delivered at the third annual Laying the Foundations Symposium on BYU campus and appeared in the written proceedings of that conference.

NOTES

¹Spencer W. Kimball, "Absolute Truth," in *Devotional Speeches of the Year 1977* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1978), 137-38.

²*Lectures on Faith*, 7:3, comp. N. B. Lundwall (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, n.d.), 61.

³N. Eldon Tanner, "Ye Shall Know the Truth," *Ensign* (May 1978): 15.

⁴"What the World Owes Dr. Sabin," *Deseret News*, March 15, 1993, A6.

⁵"Mathematical Parables," *BYU Studies* 34, no. 4 (1994-95): 94. James W. Cannon is Professor of Mathematics at Brigham Young University.

⁶Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology*, 10th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 120-21.

⁷Evelyn Roehl, *Whole Food Facts* (Rochester, Vt.: Healing Arts Press, 1988), 115.

⁸Devotional delivered on June 18, 1968, by Marion G. Romney, "Learn by Faith," *BYU Speeches of the Year 1968* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1969), 4.

⁹Lindon J. Robison, "Economic Insights from the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1 (Fall 1992): 35-53.

¹⁰Robison, "Economic Insights," 45.

¹¹Robison, "Economic Insights," 47.

¹²Robison, "Economic Insights," 49.

¹³"There Is Sunshine in My Soul Today," *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), 227.

¹⁴Jean Ernstrom, "Jesus, Listening, Can Hear," *Ensign* 18 (June 1988): 46-47.