



12-1-2010

Strangers and Pilgrims: The Challenge of the Real

Robert K. Thomas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>

Recommended Citation

Thomas, Robert K. (2010) "Strangers and Pilgrims: The Challenge of the Real," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 49 : Iss. 4 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol49/iss4/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

“Strangers and Pilgrims” The Challenge of the Real

Robert K. Thomas

A few months ago in a forum address, I spoke concerning the challenge of the ideal. In that speech, I suggested that perfectionism—fretfully striving after ultimates in everything we do—can become an obvious indulgence and, in extreme cases, a disorder of the spirit. “Impossible dreams” and “unreachable stars,” in other words, are more frustrating than helpful as we seek to achieve our highest potential. At the same time, however, the possible and reachable present their own built-in problems. I would like to address those problems now by speaking to the challenge of the real.

When we are young, the real may appear synonymous with restraint. I recall a time when our only daughter, then age four, gave memorable expression to her confrontation with reality. Perhaps I had urged our children once too often to keep their wants and expectations modest—to be, as I said, “realistic.” Her small body stiff with frustration, our little daughter finally exclaimed, “Daddy, *realistic* is my hatiest word!”

Like my daughter, we may conclude in our youth that words like *realistic*, *reality*, or *the real*—seemingly loaded with limitations—head our own list of hatiest words. We practice musical instruments to the beat of the metronome, develop physical coordination before athletic proficiency. As our world expands during years of formal schooling, the real, the actual, occasionally exceeds our expectations. We are less conscious of restraint than we are of possibility. Yet even in our most euphoric moments, we never really escape from what Walter Pater calls “the iron outline of the horizon.”¹

Our sight has limits, and so does our insight. For instance, we rarely understand our so-called failures completely. At best, we learn to avoid that

Robert K. Thomas

This talk is excerpted from a forthcoming book of the best speeches of Robert K. Thomas (1918–1998). He served the BYU community for thirty-two years as an English professor, founder and director of the Honors Program, and academic vice president. With Bruce B. Clark he co-authored the five-volume compilation *Out of the Best Books*, designed for study by Relief Society women. He served as a bishop, stake president, and president of the Australia Melbourne Mission. His speeches truly capture his wisdom, faith, love of humankind, and passion for literature and beauty. The book, edited by Daryl R. Hague, will be available from BYU Studies early in 2011.



which hurts, but a good part of life's lessons involve learning what reality is *not*. The actual is rarely a neat match for the expected. The real world that commencement rhetoric paints as unqualified promise may appear a bit smudged to some of us. Our major may have trained us well for a particular job, but has it prepared us at all for rejection, for no job at all, or for a job that hardly uses our hard-won skills?

Soberingly, the reality that the entire civilized world faces today is not one that will yield to economic manipulation alone. As a scarred survivor of the Great Depression, I recognize elements in our present circumstance that are as different and unsettling as an invasion from outer space. Genetic engineering promises—or threatens—forms of life beyond the imagining. Machines now being developed have reaction times and a range of alternatives matching traditional definitions of human thought. Robots with exquisite sensors exercise quality control in highly subjective areas; these areas are so subjective that they were long thought to be a final bastion of humanity. We need not speculate about the long-range consequences of such achievement. At this point, we need only acknowledge that the real world facing today's graduates may be in process of accelerating—and disconcerting—change.

We need to view the present through untinted glasses. While other ages may have shared our demand for immediate personal gratification, they surely lacked our means for granting it. We are coerced by *now* and apparently committed to its full exploitation. "Quickie courses" and speed reading are surely of a piece with fast foods and fun runs. If we would look toward others rather than ourselves, if we would ponder rather than react, we must repudiate our obsession with the immediate. Our technology must not become a brisker means to a questionable end. The widespread use of computer expertise in video games, which essentially simulate—in dazzling color and stunning iteration—a childish play at cops and robbers, should alert us to how easily we can mistake variety for progress.

Happily, many of us have the perspective of having served a mission or shouldered the responsibilities of marriage and children; these perspectives provide an eternal context to our *now*. A year or so ago at the end of a semester, I noted a young mother and daughter waiting for husband and father during the last hour of the final examination period. The evening was getting dark; the little girl was tired of waiting; and the young man they were awaiting was among the last to finish. Finally he appeared, dazed from his three-hour ordeal, wilting with disappointment. Then his daughter saw him, and in a voice edged with ecstasy she cried, "There's my Daddy!" As the young man, clutching his daughter tightly, glanced over her head to the loving, encouraging look in the face of his wife, I ceased to worry about him. He would recover from what had happened to him in that examination—and quickly—for *his* present was rich with past commitment and future promise.

If the heady fact of commencement is a satisfying *now* for many new graduates, it will quickly become part of their history, part of that past upon which they stand and from which they brace their purchase on the world. New graduates begin to come to terms with that past rather soon. How seriously they have prepared themselves in college, for instance, may be evident in their first full-time job or in the accelerating demands of further study. Many graduates probably know the satisfaction of having worked hard and consistently during their undergraduate years; others may quickly begin reviewing a flawed effort.

In any case, my counsel is to waste little time on remorse, plucking at loose threads that are beyond our easy reweaving. Unlike contrition—which is usually the beginning of a genuine resolve to repent—remorse is a frozen state in which we rehearse our shortcoming in static consternation. Skipped classes, wasted time, the deliberate choice of undemanding courses, all of these form part of what we chose to be. A competitive and usually impersonal world awaits us.

Regardless of past decisions, what we have will probably be enough if we acknowledge our strengths as well as our deficiencies, not only counting the tares but noting the wheat. Growing up in a small, slightly truculent, and generally drab town of Marshfield on the Oregon coast, I was acutely aware of what both I and my hometown were not. I found early that I was not a gifted athlete, and I learned that the town gave obvious recognition only to athletic prowess. Sailors, loggers, and mill workers comprised the bulk of the working population, and their cultural and educational needs seemed to be satisfied early and simply. In recounting what the town and townspeople lacked, I found just as much fault in myself. We were all losers.

On the evening of the day in which Pearl Harbor was attacked, I sat by the radio in growing apprehension, for Marshfield had the only deep-water port between San Francisco and Portland, and it lacked obvious defenses. The town was well-known to hundreds of Japanese sailors who had loaded lumber at its docks over the years. We sat in darkness and heard our local station report that a Japanese cruiser had apparently been sighted off the Golden Gate and was headed north. In a thousand homes there was but one thought—we were liable to be under attack by morning. Suddenly Pearl Harbor seemed very near, and the war was no longer a distant abstraction.

The rather excited and somewhat garbled report concerning the approaching cruiser was followed by something remarkable in the voice of the announcer—who spoke for the town—and in my own attitude. Calmly, firmly, the announcer suggested that we find our hunting rifles by candlelight and gather at the armory, where all the ammunition available at the local sporting goods store would be distributed. I pulled out my 7mm Mauser, reflected that it was hardly a combat weapon, thought briefly about the size of the guns on the Japanese cruisers that had often visited us, and prepared to join my comrades at the armory. We would be only a handful, but our defense of country—and, yes, town—would be implacable. I found in myself a courage I had never known I had, and I sensed an equal fearlessness in the motley but incredibly unified group being summoned to battle. Throughout the night I reflected that I was not disposed to fight, but there was no place in the world I would rather have been that night than with my townsfolk in Marshfield, Oregon. If the effects of our vigil together did not result in massive goodwill or general reform, none of us was ever the same afterwards. We knew something about one another that made a difference and provided the modest base upon which to build a community. Together we were a force because all had found they could rise in a strength they had not known they possessed.

Our college years may not stimulate such dramatic introspection as I have just described, but we must not underestimate what we learn in

college, what we become. Despite easy jokes to the contrary, most new graduates do not overestimate themselves, and every single one can move in the strength of a desire to learn more, to be even better prepared. Consider Alma's immensely insightful comment that a simple desire to believe is the seed from which both faith and knowledge come (see Alma 32). That insight is meaningful in every facet of our lives.

If the real world we encounter in days to come seems willing to substitute policy for principle or the possible for the preferable, or if inequity appears to be taken for granted and crassness accepted without apology, we may choose opposition by placard and demonstration, but I hope we are beyond such gestures. During the height of nationwide campus protests a few years ago, a friend from an eastern university could not believe that BYU was so free of overt dissent. He made several guesses as to why we were so different, and I finally suggested that he talk to a few students to see if they were as apathetic as he believed.

Stopping one student, my friend asked the young man if he could not think of anything to demonstrate about. I will never forget the student's answer. Gently, he explained that he had just returned from a mission to the Far East where, two weeks before, he had been running for his life from a small mob of radical young people who threatened to kill him. He then said firmly that he *did* intend to change the world, but he knew how hard that was to do, and the thought of trying to effect a change by walking around with a poorly lettered placard seemed a bit unreal. This young man understood that to a greater or lesser extent, the world of symbolic gesture almost always floats free of reality. We must not mistake our adversary and end up the pawns of simplistic special interests.

We should all recognize by now that the challenge of the real requires forthright confrontation with our insecurities. Our childish frustrations, our past mistakes, our present retreat to self, all of these speak the primal language of fear and betray our lack of faith. Expectation, a secular attempt to give substance to hope, is simply a substitute for faith. Without faith, we fall into fear. All fear is paralyzing, and only faith can free us from the repressions that generate poor mental and physical health. Those repressions are manifest in varying expressions of hypersensitivity. My internist, for example, recently advised me not to get the gadgetry by which I could check my own blood pressure, lest in a strange manifestation of the Heisenberg principle my overly conscientious checking could, in itself, keep my actual pressure uncertain.

Hebrews 11—which has had a profound influence on my thinking—lists the great men and women of ancient Israel who triumphed through faith. The list is impressive, and their accomplishments are noted in detail.

In verse thirteen, however, we come to the essence of this chapter and to the heart of faith: “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.” I skimmed past that verse many times. One day, however, in a moment of great personal deprivation, I turned to Hebrews 11. Suddenly, I heard verse thirteen’s casual thunder: the greatest men and women, God’s most faithful servants, died without seeing the fulfillment of the promises they received. These faithful people were indeed strangers and pilgrims—not understanding, feeling a bit alien, but faring forward in confidence and courage toward a goal given its hard edge by what George Santayana calls the “soul’s invincible surmise.”²

Informed by the soul’s invincible surmise—genuine faith—we can successfully confront the challenges of the real. Consider the resounding words of Habakkuk: “Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation” (Hab. 3:17–18). In such faith, with such perspective, the so-called real, however bleak it may appear, loses much of its determining power. We can indeed find significant work. We can view apparent limitations so creatively—and with such resolution—that circumstance reflects rather than thwarts our will. We can find and exemplify excellence. Above all, we can become men and women of destiny.

Robert K. Thomas delivered this address as a commencement speech at Brigham Young University on April 21, 1983.

1. Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas* (London: Macmillan, 1885), 449.

2. George Santayana, “O World, Thou Chooseth Not the Better Part!” in *Poems of Faith*, ed. Bob Blaisdell (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 2002), 96.