



2017

Envisioning Brigham Young University: Foreword to John S. Tanner's *Learning in the Light*

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Recommended Citation

Hafen, Bruce C. (2017) "Envisioning Brigham Young University: Foreword to John S. Tanner's *Learning in the Light*," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 56 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol56/iss1/10>

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Envisioning Brigham Young University

Foreword to John S. Tanner's *Learning in the Light*

Bruce C. Hafen

Editor's note: Bruce C. Hafen, an emeritus General Authority and former president of Ricks College, wrote this foreword to Learning in the Light: Selected Talks at BYU by John S. Tanner, who is the current president of BYU–Hawaii. This book, a new title offered by BYU Studies, gives insight into John Tanner the person and into his views on the Latter-day Saint endeavor to advance in light and knowledge “by study and also by faith.” The following encapsulates well the issues that have long concerned both educators and students of the Mormon community.

We needed a Thomas Jefferson.

It was the early 1990s at BYU, and I was the university's provost. Circumstances on the campus had made clear that we needed to clarify some key concepts and relationships among faculty, students, administration, and the school's trustees about the very idea of BYU. We needed a meeting of the minds; we needed to become of one heart. And our resolutions needed a written form that would bless both us and those who would come after us with clarity, harmony, and shared purpose.

So we asked John Tanner to help, and he became our Jefferson. The following brief context will shed light on the historic value of what John has done for all who have a stake in BYU, both then and—as evidenced by the talks in this volume—since then.

During the 1970s and '80s, BYU took an astonishing leap in the quality of its teaching, learning, and scholarship. The higher education

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community began to see the university in an increasingly favorable light—a national *U.S. News* poll in the mid-1990s ranked BYU among the country's top twenty-five undergraduate teaching universities.

These decades ran parallel with a general cultural revolution that had been ignited on college campuses by student free speech protests at Berkeley in 1964—a movement with vague but multiple causes that eventually shook the very foundations of American education, challenging traditions and institutional authority at every hand. The momentum of the student movement was accelerated by perceived overlaps with such broader public causes as the campaign for racial equality and opposition to the war in Vietnam. It also fueled, and was fueled by, growing secularization and a passionate emphasis on individual rights.

In this environment, BYU's increased academic quality attracted many able new faculty whose graduate training often reflected the new individualistic, anti-institutional assumptions. Still, most of these new professors felt downright liberated by BYU's religious atmosphere, because nearly all of them were devoted Latter-day Saints who welcomed the freedom—not allowed elsewhere—to include their religious beliefs in their teaching. As the number of new faculty grew, so did the number of gifted students. Their presence and their curiosity enriched both the intellectual and spiritual quality of campus-wide conversations. They wanted to know how to articulate and how to exemplify BYU's educational vision in ways that would enliven its spiritual foundations while helping the university contribute seriously to a society riven with intellectual confusion and growing moral decay.

During this stimulating yet provocative season, the BYU administration identified two major projects that called for Jefferson-like capacities—we needed (1) a faculty-generated and Board-approved policy statement that defined and integrated the roles of both individual academic freedom and the university's institutional academic freedom and (2) a full articulation of the "Aims of a BYU Education." For leadership in both projects, we turned to John S. Tanner—a young English professor who until then had not yet served as a department chair, a dean, or a university administrator—to be assisted by BYU law professor James D. Gordon, John's equally able friend. The two had been graduate students at Berkeley together.

Why John Tanner? In addition to his considerable skill and judgment as a writer, thinker, and mediator, John didn't need to have anyone draw a picture for him of what the very idea of BYU looked like—he was himself a uniquely accurate, complete picture of what that idea looked

like. He was a scholar/teacher with impeccable credentials—a Berkeley Ph.D. and an award-winning book on John Milton published by Oxford University Press. And he had a believing heart. What John once said about famed LDS chemist Henry Eyring aptly fit himself as well: “He was devout in his faith as well as a world-class [scholar] who never lost his boyish enthusiasm for learning and teaching.”

Like Jefferson, then, John was not just a hired wordsmith but the personal embodiment of the educated, mature, well-disciplined liberty he was raised up to describe. Moreover, it was critical for the BYU faculty to understand, participate in, own, and fully share in the relevant ideas, even to the details. Chairing the committee on academic freedom thus was not a job for a “manager” who would issue demands and edicts. It was, rather, a task for a teacher and leader who could teach, inspire, and incorporate the best ideas from other faculty—building an informed consensus that would blend individual and institutional academic freedoms into a harmonious and lasting whole.

Looking back now, the established outcomes from these two projects have stood the test of time so well that one might wonder why they seemed so daunting when first launched. As John said in a BYU Devotional in 1992,

About a year ago, Bruce Hafen asked me to chair a committee that would draft recommendations on academic freedom. Knowing this issue had swamped far larger vessels than my small craft, I did what any of you would have done. I had an anxiety attack and looked for the nearest exit. Over the next several months, I tried lots of creative evasion strategies, but I also felt a growing conviction that maybe, just maybe, this was work I was supposed to do. Perhaps, unknown to me, this is why I studied Milton and Kierkegaard, two ardent advocates of liberty and faith. I felt the tug of Mordecai’s question to Esther: “And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” So, like Esther, I went forward, resolving, “And if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:14, 16).

Why would John have been looking for exits, and why did his work matter so much, both then and now? In his landmark 1957 book *The Mormons*, Catholic sociologist Thomas O’Dea looked at the strong LDS emphasis on higher education and postulated that Mormonism’s authoritarian and literalistic nature was probably incompatible with the genuine intellectual inquiry that characterizes truly legitimate higher education. Thus, said O’Dea, “the encounter of Mormonism and

modern secular learning is still taking place. It is a spectacle of the present, of which no history can as yet be written. Upon its outcome will depend in a deeper sense the future of Mormonism.”¹

Over the next two generations, BYU’s increasing academic rigor began to test O’Dea’s proposition. A few faculty members probed the boundaries in ways that attracted considerable attention, both from BYU’s governing Board and from the public.

I recall, for example, a visit to our campus from a *New York Times* education writer. As I tried to explain both our spiritual commitments and our commitments to intellectual rigor, he said, “If I didn’t believe that BYU is serious about its devotion both to academic excellence and to Mormon religious values, I wouldn’t be here—there would be no story. It’s the combination that makes you unique and interesting. Nearly all other religious universities wind up choosing mostly a secular path or mostly a religious one. I hope you succeed, but it won’t be easy.”

President Boyd K. Packer once said that reason and revelation will mix only when they’re interactively in motion, like stirring oil and water. When the motion stops, they may separate and pull apart. But with all that movement, it is possible to get motion sickness. Perhaps that’s why President Packer added that it helps to have a third ingredient, a catalyst, which itself remains unchanged in the blending process. That catalyst is the Spirit, he said, and it can be aided by our effort to give revelation the priority it deserves.

I thought of his idea when a close BYU friend said to me late one night during the early ’90s, “All of my professional life I’ve believed in the dream of building a truly first-rate university that is fully dedicated to the leadership and the values of the Church. But tonight I don’t know if the idea of BYU can really work.” He and I exchanged glances that reflected the weight of our both having invested our time and energy over many years in this campus we cared about so much. Then we concluded that whether the idea of BYU works was basically up to us—BYU faculty, students, and administrators. What President Gordon B. Hinckley called “this great experiment” of BYU’s devotion to both sacred and secular knowledge won’t succeed all by itself.

So much good occurs when BYU does succeed in the lives of its students and faculty that we shouldn’t be surprised when the Adversary tries to pull our dreams apart. And we’re often dealing with the contrary elements of some large and important paradoxes—elements in apparent contradiction that can in fact work wonders together, like justice and

mercy; personal freedom and submission to legitimate authority; the life of the mind and the life of the spirit; the world of the Church and the world of higher education.

When we actively wrap our arms around such paradoxes and lovingly but knowingly hold their moving forces together in a dynamic equilibrium, the BYU idea works. I've seen it work, time after time, in my life and in the lives of many others, and its blessings are worth every ounce of strength it takes to clasp our arms around the dream and hold on to it dearly—if need be, to “stretch forth [our arms] all the day long” (Jacob 6:4).

That's what John Tanner—and many others like him—have exemplified so well. The very best resolution of O'Dea's challenge lies not in abstract statements but in the lives of teachers and students who have productively combined the quest for the highest intellectual and professional rigor with the quest for authentic spiritual values and personal character. Successful role models are the best answer in resolving any paradox. And that resolution is what this collection of talks and essays offers us—both in what its author says and in what he has become.

The volume's first section includes John's talks to the BYU faculty during 2004–11 when he was academic vice president. My personal favorite in this group is “Learning in the Light,” which takes the faculty on a virtual tour of the new exhibit in the Joseph F. Smith building called “Educating the Soul: Our Zion Tradition of Learning and Faith.” Here John teaches us how to let this original, student-influenced exhibit instruct us about the “soul” dimension that has always been the core of BYU's mission. His language and approach naturally integrate both academic and spiritual forms of excellence, and he models fine education by multiple, well-focused allusions and references to literary and historical sources that feel innate with him.

Section 2 includes other talks on education and section 3 includes talks of a devotional nature. My favorite in these sections is “One Step Enough,” a BYU devotional from 1992 that looks candidly at both the faith and the fear in scriptural, literary, and first-person stories of faith, sacrifice, and uncertainty. Here we see especially well how John Tanner's own life experience embodies the “aims of a BYU education.”

Since I began teaching at BYU forty-five years ago, I have heard many talks and read many essays about BYU's spiritual and intellectual mission. I've not heard that mission described more eloquently or with more insight than in John's work (see also his *Notes from an Amateur*²).

At his best, he is reminiscent of Elder Neal A. Maxwell, with whom he has much in common—intuitive confidence in gospel premises as the best foundation for sound reasoning; a high degree of awareness about cultural context; equally fluent, even native-tongued, in both the language of the scriptures and the language of liberal education; meek, bright, and empathic; and is married to Susan Tanner who, like the late Colleen Maxwell, is both his editor and his equal in sharing these same qualities.

Notes

1. Thomas O’Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 240.
2. John S. Tanner, *Notes from an Amateur: A Disciple’s Life in the Academy* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), which is a book of essays based on brief messages sent periodically to BYU faculty.