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# The Quest for Education

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# The Quest for Education

BY STUDY AND ALSO BY FAITH

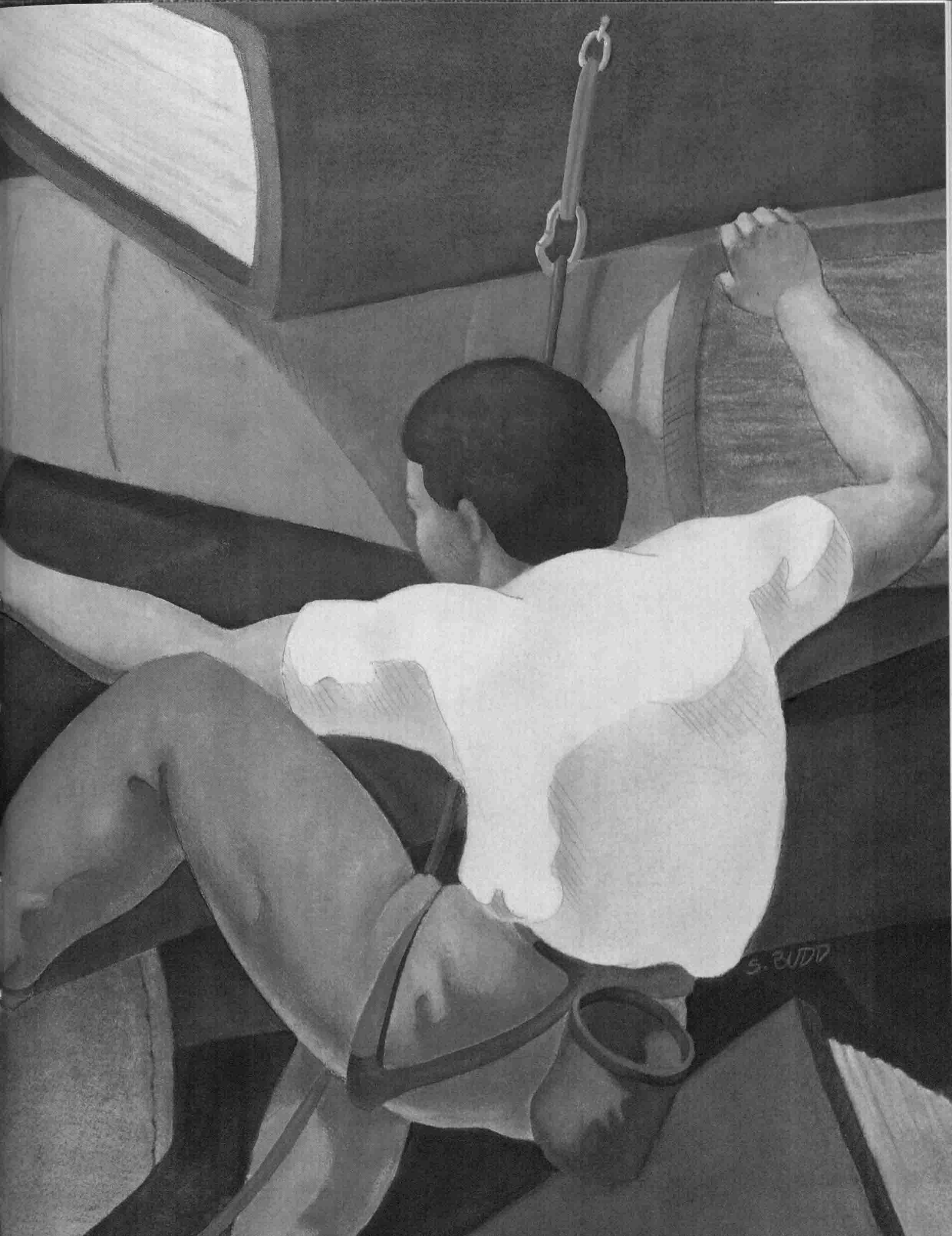
By Richard L. Bushman

**W**e call the occasion of our meeting today a commencement to recognize the new lives you are about to begin. You are scattering in a thousand directions and within a short time will be caught up in new worlds, some of them far from here and quite different from the lives you

have known in Provo. But beginnings must also be endings, and today you are ending something too. You are ending your lives as students, leaving familiar places, good friends, and a particular kind of community, the community of scholars. My thoughts on this occasion might better be called an ending rather than a commencement address, for I wish to ask what it  
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*Richard L. Bushman is a professor of history at Columbia University and taught at BYU from 1960-68. He delivered this address at BYU's graduation services, August 15, 1991.*

Illustration by Spencer Budd



## THE QUEST FOR EDUCATION

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means to have been a member of the community of scholars. How will your time at BYU affect the new lives you are beginning today?

College teachers are sometimes criticized for trying to make little scholars of undergraduates when very few of you will go on to become scholars. But in my opinion that is precisely what we should do: make scholars of you. For the time you are at the university, we should try to catch you up in the scholarly life. Students should sense the immense pleasure of pursuing knowledge and know its pride, its rigor, its confusion, and its reassurances. If your education has been successful, you have been scholars. While scrambling for grades to make a good record, you now and then felt the pure happiness of knowing something exactly and truly, and in those moments you were scholars.

Now you are leaving us and what will become of you? Many of you are Lat-

ter-day Saints, as I am, and during your sojourn among the scholars, you may also have experienced the ambivalence of the scholarly life. Is scholarship good from an eternal perspective or is it bad?

"To be learned is good," the scriptures say, "if. . ." There is an if in the passage. Scholarship is not endorsed unconditionally. There are reservations and uncertainties and, in fact, dangers. "When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish." (2 Nephi 9:28, 29) These hazards of learning are part of the life of your

teachers, and in joining us for the past few years you have been exposed to the same dangers. In this respect you will not leave us. For you have eaten of the apple and gained knowledge and hence-

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forth will never be entirely out of jeopardy, never entirely free from the dangers of scholarship. These hazards are what I wish to talk about today.

From one point of view, no modern  
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# THE QUEST

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religion more warmly supports learning than the Latter-day Saints. It would be difficult to match the classic scriptures: "Seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith." (D&C 88:118) "Study and learn, and become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people." (D&C 90:15) In some passages of Joseph Smith's life, we sense a ravenous hunger for knowledge. In the midst of the saints' poor and arduous beginnings, he organized schools and universities and spent days and days in the classroom himself. Learning was given the best possible endorsement in the scriptures and in Joseph's life: It was made part of God's work.

Those first seeds have borne fruit in our culture. The passages on learning are not empty words. Years ago when I was teaching at BYU, one of the sociologists here made a study of the impact of various American cultures on educational values. He prepared lists of men and women who achieved distinction by earning doctoral degrees in all branches of scholarship and noted their undergraduate colleges. He then held constant other factors such as the native ability of students at the colleges so that only cultural influence was being measured. Finally, he searched for the colleges that produced the most scholars. In the list of the top ten, along with two Jewish universities in New York City, were Brigham Young University and Utah State, two unexpected contestants. The implication was, of course, that Mormon culture directed its talented young people toward scholarship more than other cultures that sent their children to much larger and better established institutions. Something in Mormon culture made young people want to learn.

Shortly after this study was completed, David McClelland, the distinguished Harvard psychologist, visited BYU, and the author of the article mentioned his findings. How would McClelland account for these unforeseen results? McClelland said that it was obvious to him. In essence he said, "You think it is your responsibility to

save the world. That's what makes you want to learn." Strangely enough, that is what Joseph Smith said, too. We are to learn, not to rise to fame and glory, but better to carry forward our mission of saving the world.

I observe the Mormon heartland from a safe distance on the eastern seaboard. But even there I am aware of the impact of Mormon educational values on our young people. During the bicentennial of the Revolutionary War in 1976, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir toured the east and visited Boston. I was then teaching at Boston University, and Chase Peterson (then dean of Admissions at Harvard and a fellow member of the church) and I decided we would invite John Silber, the illustrious and controversial president of Boston University, to the concert. Silber had spoken at BYU and knew quite a few Latter-day Saints. At the dinner before the concert, Silber turned to my wife, Claudia, and asked, "When are you going to send the missionaries?" Jaws dropped around the table, and Silber, who loves the dramatic effect, went on to say, when are you going to send the missionaries to Boston University. What our student body needs, he said, is an influential core of returned missionaries. My wife, never at a loss for words, replied, when are you going to set up a scholarship fund for them. Then it was his turn to drop the jaw.

We have had the same experience at Columbia. The associate dean of the law school became aware of the twenty or thirty Latter-day Saints at Columbia Law School, many of them BYU graduates, and asked our stake president, a member of the Columbia law faculty, to help him recruit more. Now the same man is dean of Columbia College and has asked Claudia and me to help recruit LDS undergraduates. When asked why he wants Mormons, he said because they are so centered.

I think the fact is that Latter-day Saints, apart from any native ability, do well in educational settings. They are clearheaded, they work hard, and they value learning. All of that comes from our culture. And you, the latest generation of graduates, must, and most certainly will, carry it on—simply because you are Latter-day Saints. It is your heritage and your destiny.

All of this is on the positive side of learning. Here we see learning and our faith coming together as the scriptures say they should. On the negative side are the hazards where learning and faith part company or go to war. Not everything in scholarship sustains our faith

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or wears a godly countenance. Those of us who live in the community of scholars do not experience it as a community of belief. While there are numerous individual believers among scholars, the mien of scholarship, its public countenance is agnostic. It does not profess belief in God and is in fact ostensibly godless.

A few years ago, an editor at *Life* magazine conceived of a volume devoted to the meaning of life. He asked people from many fields and vocations to sum up in a hundred words their understanding of the meaning of life. The contributors were not a cross-section of the population. They asked a

few religious people like myself to contribute, but mainly they were notables of one sort or another—scientists, entertainers, novelists, philosophers, artists. When the book came out, I was surprised at how little faith I found in the statements. A few respondents said there was no meaning to life; a person just lived it. Others found meaning but mainly in some kind of harmony—with other people or with nature. Very few

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mentioned anything that bore a resemblance to the God that we know.

The book made me realize how little faith there is among the men and women who control our public culture—the writers, the media leaders, the intellectuals. However much the polls show everyday Americans professing belief in God, our cultural leaders do not profess that kind of faith. And that is true for scholars and teachers as well. A friend recently proposed a book of essays by believing historians about their faith and asked me to list possible contributors. I searched through the names of the hundreds of historians whom I know and could think of very few who, so far as I can tell, worship God.

We all live our lives in this prevailing atmosphere of unbelief, but scholars live that way more than most. From my undergraduate years at Harvard on, I

have always felt myself to be a little bit of an outsider because of my belief. Not that I am not at home with my fellow scholars and do not love and admire many of them, but I recognize that my belief sets me apart in their eyes, that there is an intellectual quirk in my makeup which they do not understand.

Soon after I was hired at the University of Delaware, I went to lunch with one of the members of the search committee who had hired me for the new job. As we drove along, just to make conversation, I mentioned that I was working on a biography of the young Joseph Smith. Something must have clicked in his head because he turned to me with a warm smile and said, "Dick, we took all that into account and decided it didn't matter."

I had a similar experience after writing the book. When I submitted the manuscript to Richard Wentworth at the University of Illinois Press, he received favorable readings from four or five scholars, but one reader, a key figure, thought the book was

too sympathetic to Joseph Smith. After analyzing how the belief of the author shaped the work on every page, the reader finally concluded that the book should be published anyway. We publish books from the viewpoint of marxists and homosexuals, he said; why not from a Mormon viewpoint?

We should not underestimate the influence of living in an atmosphere of unbelief such as this. Strong as we may be, the awareness of doubt and skepticism all around us will have its effect. I was an undergraduate in the heyday of logical positivism, the philosophical doctrine that only the experience of the senses provides a foundation for sound reasoning. As an undergraduate I was deeply troubled by doubts and went into the mission field not at all sure the Church was true. When I returned I took a class on American intellectual history from Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

Mark Cannon, a graduate student in government at the time, went to Schlesinger's lecture on Joseph Smith with me. Schlesinger began by saying that he knew that there were sensible people who believed in the Mormon religion—Ezra Taft Benson had just been appointed secretary of agriculture, and Schlesinger was made newly aware of Mormons in high places. But then he launched into his lecture with his classic smirk and was unrelenting in his sarcasm. As we walked from the lecture hall, Mark observed that at least Schlesinger got more laughs per minute from Joseph Smith than from any of the historical figures he discussed during the semester.

For years I felt that I had to answer these scholars. I had to come up with a reply to every doubt, every jibe, every question, every argument; and my own faith would not be secure until I did. I held imaginary dialogues with these people in an effort to subdue them. And I did find things to say in reply, for we have been given a great deal of concrete evidence for our beliefs. But in the end I recognized that I could not answer them all. There were far too many of them, and I could not win the doubters over anyway. Furthermore, it did not matter to me. I had to recognize a simple fact about myself. I am a believer. I believe in God and Christ and want to know them. My relations with scholarship and scholars have to begin there.

What of you who now have eaten of the fruit of knowledge and for a time have been part of this world of scholarship? Will you come out where I have? Will you be believers twenty years from now? We take a great risk when we invite you here to join the world of scholarship. As you have heard so often, you, more than any other single group, will make up the pillars of the coming Church. As you scatter across the world, you are the ones on whose shoulders the Kingdom will rest. How, then, can we invite you, our precious hope for the future, to learn of doubt as well as faith, to encounter minds, if only through books, who contend that reason leads in the end to disbelief and

the repudiation of morality.

The university does its best to attract the most competent, well-trained, faithful men and women possible to be your teachers, and has succeeded admirably. But it cannot and does not attempt to remove from the shelves every book that attacks the church, casts doubt on the existence of God, or criticizes traditional standards of conduct. Those books are in the BYU library as they are in every other university library in the land.

My son and daughter-in-law, who were in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, during the Iraqi war, were issued gas masks and instructed on how to create a safe room sealed off from poison gas. You saw the scenes of people putting tape around windows and door jambs. The gas masks for their 4- and 2-year-old children were essentially transparent bags with rubber strips that went around their necks with a small electric pump to pull the air through a purifying device. Their new baby boy, born on the night of one of the last SCUD attacks, had a mask with a rubber belt around his abdomen. The masks and safe rooms were meant to keep the children free of toxic fumes delivered on a warhead. There is no way you can be sealed off against ideas that oppose the gospel. It cannot be done. Our son said that their two children could not abide the gas masks and would not keep them on for a minute. You would not tolerate such treatment in this university either, and furthermore it would not be right to subject you to it. You were not sent here to be isolated from evil. It would be wrong to attempt to create a safe room, and it would not work.

But if, on principle, you cannot be protected against error, what can we your teachers, your believing teachers, say to you about the unbelief in the world of scholarship? How could we, have asked your parents to let you come into the university where you learn about error as well as about truth?

We can say only one thing: You will, with God's help, find the path. Having taught you what we believe and what we know, our part is to trust you. That is the only way.

My son, the one in Saudi Arabia, went off to Harvard as an undergraduate the way I did. I was very much aware as he went that now he was free to choose—to believe or not, to obey or not. He could continue faithful, or he could put all that we had taught him away and become someone who was not LDS, who was not a believer.

Contemplating all this, about January of his first year I wrote him a letter. I was thinking of the mission that should figure into his plans soon. I told him that I knew he would have to make the basic decisions about the church on his own. I only asked one thing of him. I asked that he keep himself worthy, that he live the commandments so that there would be no guilt to cloud his thinking. I wanted him to make a perfectly free decision, and guilt would constrain his freedom. I am happy to say that he went on a mission and now he and his wife are doing their parts in the Riyadh Ward.

In my view, it is one of God's mir-

acles that most of you, perhaps all, will follow the same course, and be faithful and serve. In the midst of the doubt and uncertainty all around us, you will choose the LDS way. We go against the grain of the public culture in our simple, direct faith in a God who loves us and hears our prayers. But contrary to the prevailing opinion, faith is not opposed to scholarship. In my experience, quite the opposite is true. If you decide that like me you are a believer, that you worship God and want to enjoy his spirit, you will find that you love learning. Your mind will clear. You will absorb and understand. You will work hard and enthusiastically. You will grow in intelligence. You will enter into your rightful intellectual inheritance as Latter-day Saints.

That believers will value and enjoy scholarship was prophesied long ago, when all I have been saying was said much better: "To be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God." □

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