

An Eternal Quest: Freedom of the Mind

President Hugh B. Brown

On 13 May 1969, Hugh B. Brown, a member of the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, addressed the student body of Brigham Young University. He was eighty-five years of age. Beautifully blending the ideals of personal freedom and religious commitment, President Brown's words of that day are frequently quoted. After fifteen years, it seems appropriate that the complete address be made available again. It is reprinted here with permission and begins a few minutes into the address, omitting some topical remarks. Internal headings have also been omitted.



One of the most important things in the world is freedom of the mind; from this all other freedoms spring. Such freedom is necessarily dangerous, for one cannot think right without running the risk of thinking wrong, but generally more thinking is the antidote for the evils that spring from wrong thinking. More thinking is required, and we call upon you students to exercise your God-given right to think through on every proposition that is submitted to you and be unafraid to express your opinions, with proper respect for those to whom you talk and proper acknowledgment of your own shortcomings.

You young people live in an age when freedom of the mind is suppressed over much of the world. We must preserve it in the Church and in America and resist all efforts of earnest men to suppress it, for when it is suppressed, we might lose the liberties vouchsafed in the Constitution of the United States.

Preserve, then, the freedom of your mind in education and in religion, and be unafraid to express your thoughts and to insist upon your right to examine every proposition. We are not so much concerned with whether your thoughts are orthodox or heterodox as we are that you shall have thoughts. One may memorize much without learning anything. In this age of speed there seems to be little time for meditation.

Dissatisfaction with what is around us is not a bad thing if it prompts us to seek betterment, but the best sort of dissatisfaction in the long run is self-dissatisfaction which leads us to improve ourselves. Maturity implies the ability to walk alone and not be ashamed within ourselves of the things we do and say.

Progress in maturity may be measured by our acceptance of increased self-responsibility and an increased sagacity in decision-making. This transition is not a time of calm enjoyment, but of growth and adaptation.

One matures as a person by responding differently today from the way in which one responded yesterday. We observe restraint so that restraints do not have to be imposed upon us; we do our best to think clearly so that we avoid chasing after false doctrines; we use deliberation so as to see through nonsense; we realize our social duty to the honest opinions of others while maintaining our own principles.

Self-discipline — and that is a subject on which I think I have somewhat a right to speak because of my military training and experience — self-discipline means doing things you would rather not do but having the courage to do them if they are right. When a course of action shows itself to be unprofitable, it is sensible and valorous to drop it.

There is no personal value in making a show of maturity if you do not have it. Affectation of any sort borders on vulgarity, and at the least it is ridiculous to pretend to feelings and beliefs that do not appeal to your intelligence. On the other hand, no mature person will be content to sit by the side of the road and watch the world go by. One cannot be merely a bystander, doing nothing but criticize.

When a human being finds himself at a dead end, he is tempted to turn to that last desperate resource of muddled mankind: lawlessness. He does not realize the unprofitableness in delinquency and the low standard of living to which it condemns him. He may even imagine himself a martyr in some trivial or irrelevant cause. His hooliganism brings discredit to the peaceful, legitimate, and often courageous protests by young people on great moral issues.

Society is indulgent toward young people, but there are limits to permissibility. Youth is right to repudiate sham and hypocrisy, but to assume that disorder and chaos have merit in themselves is to assume that we are no longer capable of reasoning together in search of the right solution of problems.

You students have strong desires. You are not content to live a merely miscellany life, however pleasurable it may be. You dream beyond the actual and think beyond your fingertips. In doing so you are living up to the great law of culture, that a man shall become all that he is created capable of becoming.

While we speak of independence and the right to think, to agree or to disagree, to examine and to question, we must not forget that fixed and unchanging laws govern in all God's creation, whether it be in the vastness of the starry heavens, or in the minute revolving universe of the atom, or in human relationships. All is law. All is cause and effect, and God's laws are universal. God has no favorites; none is immune from either life's temptations or the consequences of his own deeds. God is not capricious.

Our reactions to the ever-changing impacts of life will depend upon our goals, our ideals. "The vision that you glorify in your mind, the ideal that you enthrone in your heart, this you will build your life by, this you will become." Every life coheres around certain fundamental core ideas whether we realize it or not, and herein lies the chief value of revealed religion. But while I believe all that God has revealed, I am not quite sure that I understand what he has revealed, and the fact that he has promised further revelation is to me a challenge to keep an open mind and be prepared to follow wherever my search for truth may lead. You young people have been attending a school presided over by the president of the Church, a school established by a prophet of God, a school where your eternal welfare is ever foremost in the minds of your professors, your administration, the faculty, and others. Our reactions to the ever-changing impacts of life will depend upon our goals and our ideals. And I would like to leave that thought with you to ponder.

Again I emphasize, there is no final goal. Life must continue to expand, to unfold, and to grow, if it is to continue to be a good life. These things are indispensable, and in this connection age makes little difference. There is opportunity for all to expand and to grow and to be and to become.

There are forces at work in our society today which degrade an intellectual quest for knowledge. These forces are nothing new. They have always been powerful. They are anti-intellectual. Forces in this country and in other countries are known and grappled with, but they are making headway. The Know-Nothings of the last century in this country could be cited as but one example. Germany in the thirties saw the burning of books and the glorification of barbaric emotion as part of the tragedy of Hitlerism.

We have been blessed with much knowledge by revelation from God which, in some part, the world lacks. But there is an incomprehensibly greater part of truth which we must yet discover. Our revealed truth should leave us stricken with the knowledge of how little we really know. It should never lead to an emotional arrogance based upon a false assumption that we somehow have all the answers — that we in fact have a corner on truth. For we do not.

Whether you are in the field of economics or political science, history or the behavioral sciences — continue your search for truth. And maintain humility sufficient to be able to revise your hypotheses as new truth comes to you by means of the spirit or the mind. Salvation, like education, is an on-going process.

One may not attain salvation by merely acknowledging allegiance, nor is it available in ready-to-wear stores or in supermarkets where it may be bought and paid for. That it is an eternal quest must be obvious to all. Education is involved in salvation and may be had only by evolution or the unfolding or developing into our potential. It is in large measure a problem of awareness, of reaching out and looking up, of aspiring and becoming, pushing back our horizons, seeking for answers, and searching for God. In other words, it is not merely a matter of conformity to rituals, climbing sacred stairs, bathing in sacred pools, or making pilgrimages to ancient shrines. The depth and height and quality of life depends upon awareness, and awareness is a process of being saved from ignorance. Man cannot be saved in ignorance.

We today not only enjoy many advantages and comforts unknown to former generations, but we suffer many trials and cope with many problems which did not plague our forefathers. We are puzzled by the frictions and the deficiencies of our society.

I think the expression, "Keep it cool," is peculiar to your age, but it means in reality, "Do not be impatient." Too many young people are so impatient that when they press an electric button they can't wait for the answer. They think there is a gap somewhere, and they think it is because of the old folks that don't know enough to press the button.

Historians, philosophers, and scientists all agree that life on this earth has been and is one continuous, never-ceasing process of readjustment. Your generation is maturing in body and mind at an earlier age than did preceding generations, and as you become aware of that fact, you are inclined to become critical of the older generation and sometimes with justification. We are not here to defend ourselves against you; we are here to let you know some things we have learned the hard way, and sometimes by sad experience.

For almost every young person, adolescence means one thing above all else: he must prove that he is no longer a child. He is fighting to establish himself as a person. When choice is to be made of a course of action or a deed, choose that which has significance. Every youth is forced to answer the question in dialogue with himself: "What are the things that I ultimately value?" He must answer with the thought in mind: "I will have to live with myself all my life, and what I decide now will influence my happiness."

As you go forward in your search for truth, and as you espouse principles and establish ideals toward which to work, pray for courage to be true to your loyalties, to your ideals and to yourself. It has been said that he who knows the precepts and neglects to obey them is like one who lights a candle in the darkness and then closes his eyes. Remember, there is a power greater than yourselves upon which you may call. It is the gospel which Paul declared to be the power of God unto salvation. There is a power available to all which, when understood and utilized, will lead to salvation . . .

I am going to have to shorten what I had thought of saying because I want to leave with you at the end a statement from my heart. You are going home shortly, many of you. This I understand is the final devotional assembly to be held on the campus this spring. I want you to take with you to your homes and to your families the spirit of the gospel of Christ. It makes it possible for you to participate in the things around you. The organization of stakes and wards on this campus has enabled thousands of young people to become active in the Church and, thereby, to open their eyes and their understanding. This question of participation was impressed upon my own mind years ago when I was acting as coordinator for servicemen.

Now I know the faculty have heard me tell this story before, but they have forgotten it. You young people perhaps haven't heard it, but you will forget it too. I want to tell you this story to emphasize the value of participation.

While I was acting as servicemen's coordinator, I was in London, England. I sent the following telegram to the senior chaplain of a large camp near Liver-

pool, "I'll be in your camp tomorrow morning at 10:00. Kindly notify all Mormon boys in your camp that we'll hold a meeting."

When I arrived the next morning I met seventy-five young men, all in uniform. They were delighted to see me although I knew none of them. They were glad to see someone from home.

There stepped out from the crowd a man who, after shaking hands, said, "I'm the one to whom you sent your telegram. I'm the chaplain of this camp. I didn't get your telegram until this morning [that is, Sunday morning]. Upon receipt of it, I made an inquiry — a careful inquiry. I found there were seventy-six Mormon boys in this camp. Seventy-five of them are here, one is in the hospital."

He said, "I wish you'd tell me, Mr. Brown, how you do it. I have six hundred men in my church in this camp, and if I gave them six months' notice they couldn't meet that record. Tell me how you do it."

"Well," I said, "if you come into our meeting we'll show you how we do it." And so he accompanied me into the quonset hut and before us sat these seventy-five young men. I had the minister sit next to me.

I said, "How many of you fellows have been on missions?" Fully 50 percent of them raised their hands. I pointed to six of them and said, "Come here and administer the sacrament." I pointed to six others and said, "Come here and be prepared to speak." I looked at my friend, the minister, and he had his mouth open. He had never seen such a thing.

And then I said, "Fellows, what shall we sing this morning?" And with one voice they said, "Come, Come, Ye Saints!" And I said, "Who can lead the music?" and most of them raised their hands. I selected one. "Who can play this portable organ?" And again there was a fine showing and one was selected.

Now, we didn't have any books but the man at the organ sounded a chord and those young men stood, shoulders back and chins pulled in, and they sang all the verses of "Come, Come, Ye Saints." Now, I have heard that sung all over the Church many times, even by the Tabernacle Choir to whom I apologize for what I am going to say. I have never heard "Come, Come, Ye Saints" sung with such fervor, such conviction, such power as those young men sang it. When they came to the last verse, "And should we die before our journey's through, happy day, all is well," I tell you it was thrilling. And as I looked at my friend again I found him weeping.

After the prayer, one of the boys knelt at the sacrament table, and he said, "Oh God, the Eternal Father . . ." and then he paused for what seemed to be a full minute before proceeding. At the close of the meeting, I went and looked him up. I put my arm across his shoulder and said, "What's the matter, lad?"

He said, "Why?"

"Well, you seemed to have difficulty in asking a blessing on the bread. Has something happened?"

"Well, sir," he said, "a few hours ago I was over Germany and France on a bombing mission. We had made our run, left our calling cards [meaning the bombs], and when we gained altitude and were about to return across the

channel, we ran into heavy flak. My tail assembly was pretty well shot away, one of my engines was out, a number of my crew were wounded, and it looked like a hopeless situation. It seemed like no power in heaven or earth could get us back across the channel to a landing field. But," he said, "Brother Brown, up there I remembered what my mother had said to me. [And this I want to say to this vast audience, both those that are here and those that are listening in.] This is what my mother said, 'If ever you find yourself in a situation where man can't help you, call on God.' I had been told that same thing in Primary, in the seminaries, in Sunday School: 'If ever you need help and man can't help you, call on God.' Although it seemed hopeless and impossible, I said, 'Oh God, the Eternal Father, please sustain this ship until we get back into England.' . . . Brother Brown, he did just that.

"When I heard of this meeting I ran all the way to get here, and when I knelt at the table and named his name again, I remembered shamefully that I had not stopped to say, 'Thank you.' And that's the reason I paused, to express my gratitude for the goodness of God."

Well, we went on with our meeting and these young men spoke, and they spoke with power and conviction. Every one who heard them was thrilled by the evidence of their faith, and my friend, the chaplain, continued to weep. When they had finished talking, I said, "Fellows, we'll have to dismiss." (That meeting was not like this; it had to be dismissed on time.) I said, "We'll have to dismiss or you won't get any chow."

They said, "We can have chow any time. Let's have a testimony meeting."

"Why," I said, "if you have a testimony meeting you'll be here another two hours."

They repeated with one voice, "Please let us have a testimony meeting."

I turned to my friend, the minister, and said, "Now I know this is unusual for you. We've been here two hours and we're going to be here another two hours. We'll excuse you if you prefer to withdraw."

He put his hand on my knee and said, "Please, sir, may I remain?" And, of course, I encouraged him to stay and then for two solid hours those young men, one after another, stood up and bore witness of the truth of the gospel. My only job was to say, "You're next, and then you, and then you," because all of them wanted to get up at once. It was a glorious occasion.

Finally there came an end. We dismissed, and this minister turned to me and said, "Mr. Brown, I have been a minister of the gospel for twenty-one years but this has been the greatest spiritual experience of my life." And again he said, "How do you do it? How did you know which of those fellows to call on?"

I replied, "It didn't make any difference which one I called on. They are all prepared. And this could happen in any camp anywhere in the world where there are seventy-five young Mormon boys."

I relate this to you, my dear students, that you may realize the value of participation, the value of a conviction of the truth, and that you may take advantage of every opportunity to bear witness to that truth.

I bear my witness to you now, as you leave for home, and as time goes on I do not know that I will be here again and that doesn't matter much as far

as you are concerned. But I want to leave this witness with you. I am too old to try to deceive you — I have one foot in the grave and [am] waiting to kick the bucket with the other. But this I want to say to you before I leave, and I say it with apologies for holding you a moment.

With all the fervor of my soul, I know that God lives, that he is a reality, that he is a personality; that Jesus of Nazareth is and was and will ever be the Son of God, the Redeemer and the Savior of the world. I know that better than I know anything else, and I say with Peter of old who was asked, “Whom say ye that I am?” He replied, as I reply. He replied with the same authority with which I speak, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And he was told by the Master what I have been told by him as well, “Flesh and blood did not reveal this unto you, but my father which is in heaven” (see Matt. 16:15–17).

God bless you, my dear fellow students, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.