

God Is the Gardener

HUGH B. BROWN

President Wilkinson, members of the faculty, honored guests, members of the board, graduating class, and the wonderful group of Brigham Young University student body, I am glad that President Wilkinson kept a little sense of humor in what he had to say, because I think that humor is a very essential part of rich and radiant living.

I want to speak about humor for just a minute. J. Golden Kimball is reported to have said that the Lord Himself must like a joke or He wouldn't have made some of you people. I hope none of you will take that personally.

It is indeed a daring, if not a reckless, venture for an octogenarian to undertake to speak across a void of sixty years to a group of vibrant young students who are graduating. But knowing of your four years of training, especially in patience and endurance in your classes, I think you will have some sympathy with me if I attempt to address you from the far side of the stream of life.

I should like to congratulate the graduating class and all the students of this great university on the fact that you have kept pretty much aloof from the activities that have been prevalent on the campuses of many other universities, where students have attempted to take control, not only of the disciplinary activities

on the campus itself but to supplement civil government, both on the campus and in life. It is too bad that these young people have thought to try to supersede established government. We cannot agree with their attempts to get what they want by means of force.

I congratulate the members, too, of the student body and the faculty on what President Wilkinson has referred to: namely, accepting the call to duty in our great land when it comes and not shirking the responsibility incident to that call.

There is another matter I want to speak of briefly but sincerely. You young people are leaving your university at a time when our nation is engaged in an abrasive and increasingly strident process of electing a president. I wonder if you would permit me—one who has managed to survive a number of these events—to pass on to you a few words of counsel.

First, I would like you to be reassured that the leaders of both major political parties in this land are men of integrity and

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unquestioned patriotism. Beware of those who feel obliged to prove their own patriotism by calling into question the loyalty of others. Be skeptical of those who attempt to demonstrate their love of country by demeaning its institutions. Know that the men of both major political parties who guide the nation's executive, legislative, and judicial branches are men of unquestioned loyalty, and we should stand by and support them. And this refers not only to one party but to all.

Strive to develop a maturity of mind and emotion and a depth of spirit that will enable you to differ with others on matters of politics without calling into question the integrity of those with whom you differ. Allow within the bounds of your definition of religious orthodoxy a variation of political belief. Do not have the temerity to dogmatize on issues where the Lord has seen fit to be silent.

I have found through long experience that our two-party system is sound. Beware of those who are so lacking in humility that they cannot come within the framework of one of our two great parties. Our nation has avoided chaos like that which is gripping France today because men have been able to temper their own desires sufficiently to seek broad agreement within one of the two major parties, rather than forming splinter groups around one radical idea. Our two-party system has served us well and should not be lightly discarded.

At a time when radicals of the right or left would inflame race against race, avoid those who preach evil doctrines of racism. When our Father declared that we, His children, were brothers and sisters, He did not limit this relationship on the basis of race. Strive to develop that true love of country that realizes that real patriotism must include within it a regard for the people, for the inhabitants of the rest of the globe. Patriots have never demanded of good men the hatred of another country as proof of one's love for his own. Acquire tolerance and compassion for others and for those of a

different political persuasion or race or religion. This is something demanded by the heavenly parentage that we all have in common.

Now I would like to bring to your attention one of the oldest subjects known to man—timeless in interest, always up to date, and imperative in its appeal. It is a subject on which the Savior spent much time, one with which philosophers have wrestled and on which scientists have ventured great, learned, and thoughtful opinions. From the beginning of time right down to this space and atomic age, this has been a lively subject, imperative in its demands. It is a topic vitally important to each and all of us from the time we enter this world until we leave it and then on throughout eternity. The subject I wish to discuss, briefly but reverently, is God and man's relationship to Him.

In the tenth chapter of Luke we read:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind. [Luke 10:27]

Can a man love God with his mind, or is the mind limited to those cold processes of reasoning only? You young men and women have already begun to study and to marvel at the wonders of your universe. Your maturing and inquiring minds have caused you to ask, "Who was in control when all this was set in motion?" I would rather you would find a reverent and truthful answer to that question than be able to read in Greek and Hebrew or be able to read the planet's story or nature's story in stone and earth and plant.

In other words, I would have you put first things first and begin your education at the center of your heart. As these convictions grow, you will hunger and thirst after knowledge, even as a plant thirsts for water. You will come to realize that without some underlying synthesis or some understandable meaning and purpose, all the knowledge that

is obtainable in the best universities would be incomplete and wholly inadequate.

I am pleading for us to take note of the underlying truths having to do with our universe, with our lives, and with our purpose in life and then to live as though we believe what we say when we say we believe in God. Jesus said that if you would have life eternal, you must know God. As we progressively come to know Him, we will be prompted to emulate Him, and that is the thing I would like to leave with this graduating class and call to the attention of all of us—that as we progressively come to know God, we will undeniably and constantly be reminded of the possibility of our emulating Him and thereby becoming more like Him.

I was in Colorado Springs recently. As a guest of the commanding officer and a speaker to the cadets, I was taken by the commanding officer on a tour of the facility and the campus there. We came to a wonderful monument topped by an eagle with spreading wings. On the base of this monument I read these words: “Man’s flight through life is sustained by the power of his knowledge.” And I asked myself this question: “What knowledge? Which phase of knowledge, which branch of learning, will most definitely and inspiringly take care of man’s flight through life?” I concluded that man’s life and his flight through life are sustained most by a knowledge of God and of man. I submit to you that faith in a personal God, one who can be referred to as “Father,” gives one a sense of dignity and holds before one an ideal toward which to strive.

He is real, as you and I are real. I want to impress that on the minds of you young students as you go out into the world—that you have Someone greater than yourself dwelling with you and on whom you can call.

In the story of the Creation, these words are recorded in Genesis: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them” (Genesis 1:27).

It was doubtless this thought of man being in God’s image, in a godlike status, that prompted the Apostle John to say, “Now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

Across the centuries, no experience has been more universal and helpful in the sense of Someone caring for us, near enough to be called upon, and responsive enough to understand. He is real and He is personal and should be idealized but also realized. We must not only possess the idea of God, but we should be possessed by it. Men do not believe in God because they have proved Him; rather, they try endlessly to prove Him because they can’t help believing in Him. He has established that in the hearts of His children.

You are now alumni, not only of a Church-related institution but one that is Church owned and operated. Be grateful for that fact, young people. As you consider the history of education in America, you may be surprised by what religion has done to the great universities of our land and of the world. I am indebted to Reverend Earl L. Riley of the First Baptist Church of Salt Lake City for some statistical information that I would like to share with you:

Pericles founded his civilization upon common culture, and it failed. Caesar founded his civilization upon law, and it failed. Alexander founded his civilization upon power, and it also failed. But our forefathers knew that any other basis than religion and education, the two greatest forces in the world, would be inadequate as a basis upon which to build a civilization. And if it were built upon anything less than real religion and good education, we would have only an artificial structure.

Twenty-three of the first twenty-four universities built in America were built by religious organizations. Out of 119 educational institutions east of the Mississippi, 103 of them were built by

religious organizations. For the first 150 years in America, churches provided all the institutions of higher learning. From these halls came leaders of thought and champions of liberty who made our republic possible.

Jefferson was an alumnus of William and Mary, and James Madison of Princeton. Alexander Hamilton was an alumnus of what is now Columbia University. It is interesting to note that all but eight of the fifty-five who signed the Declaration of Independence, and most of those who wrote the Constitution, breathed the atmosphere of church-supported institutions of learning.

Thomas Jefferson declared that people cannot be ignorant and free. The founding of the University of Virginia was the crowning achievement of his life.

Benjamin Franklin rejoiced that he was the founder of the University of Pennsylvania. George Washington left a \$50,000 bequest, and Washington and Lee University was the recipient of that legacy.

The early leaders of church and state in America were the products of schools begun by orthodox Christianity. Sixteen of the first eighteen presidents were college graduates from church-related institutions of higher learning. Seven of the first chief justices of the Supreme Court were college graduates of church-related schools.

That is the end of the quotation, and I concur with his implications.

Now you have been taught, young people, to believe that God and man belong to a society of eternal intelligences. The difference is, of course, indescribably great, but it is one of degree rather than of kind. The idea of a supreme being is indelibly stamped on the inner consciousness of men. Though man is to some extent master of his destiny, he is conscious of his relation to the supreme source of his existence.

Dr. James E. Talmage sums up the discussion of creation and the universe as follows:

What is man in this boundless setting of sublime splendor? I answer you: Potentially now, actually to

be, he is greater and grander, more precious according to the arithmetic of God, than all the planets and suns of space. For him were they created.

I'm reading this because I would like you to feel the dignity of man and to dignify it by your conduct as you go forward as responsible citizens of our country and representatives of this great university.

In this world man is given dominion over a few things; it is his privilege to achieve supremacy over many things.

"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork" (Psalm 19:1). Incomprehensibly grand as are the physical creations of the earth and space, they have been brought into existence as means to an end, necessary to the realization of the supreme purpose, which in the words of the Creator is thus declared:

*"For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39). [James E. Talmage, address delivered in the Tabernacle, 9 August 1931; "The Earth and Man," *Millennial Star* 93, no. 53 (31 December 1931): 862–63; also *The Earth and Man* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1931), 16]*

Some theologians tell us that God is incomprehensible, but He says that to know Him is life eternal. The one view takes hope out of life and the other is an eternal beacon.

Sometimes young people say that we older ones are behind the times, and they are probably right. They are certainly right. But during the time that is behind me—and I bring this to you as a testimony—I have developed a faith in a personal, living God, which I consider to be the most priceless possession. It has been my glorious privilege, progressively, to know Him. Such faith gives order, meaning, stimulus, and direction to life. We cannot know Him by the intellect alone, nor with bodily senses alone, nor by only reading scripture but by

inspiration—the illumination of the soul, such as was experienced by Peter when he replied to the question of Christ “Whom say ye that I am?” He said, without hesitation, though it was a surprise to him what he said, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

And Christ replied to him, “Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 16:15–17).

If you will always keep in mind that you are actually the children of your Heavenly Father, that there is something of Him in you, and that you may aspire to become something like that from which you came and cooperate with Him in the unfinished work of creation, you will remember that His plan for the salvation of His children had purpose behind it—a design to be carried out. If you keep these great truths in mind, you will be fortified and sustained, whatever life may hold for you.

It is important not only that you keep growing but that you be versatile, adaptive, and unafraid to venture. In other words, be up to date. Seek to obtain a certain flexibility of mind that will inspire you to listen, to learn, and to adapt as you move forward into a new and ever-expanding universe.

*From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth,
From the laziness that is content with half-truths,
From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,
O God of Truth, deliver us.*

[Ancient prayer]

In the process of self-discovery you will sometimes stand amazed at what you have progressively become aware of, having to do with your potential range and your abilities. You will not then be discouraged by a failure or two along the way, as long as you are learning and growing. I leave with you my humble testimony in respect to these things.

Now some of you as you go forward are going to meet with disappointment—perhaps many disappointments, some of them crucial.

Sometimes you will wonder if God has forgotten you. Sometimes you may even wonder if He lives and where He has gone. But in these times when so many are saying God is dead and when so many are denying His existence, I think I could not leave with you a better message than this: God is aware of you individually. He knows who you are and what you are, and, furthermore, He knows what you are capable of becoming. Be not discouraged, then, if you do not get all the things you want just when you want them. Have the courage to go on and face your life and, if necessary, reverse it to bring it into harmony with His law.

Could I tell you just a quick story out of my own experience in life? Sixty-odd years ago I was on a farm in Canada. I had purchased the farm from another who had been somewhat careless in keeping it up. I went out one morning and found a currant bush that was at least six feet high. I knew that it was going all to wood. There was no sign of blossom or of fruit. I had had some experience in pruning trees before we left Salt Lake to go to Canada, as my father had a fruit farm. So I got my pruning shears and went to work on that currant bush, and I clipped it and cut it and cut it down until there was nothing left but a little clump of stumps.

And as I looked at them, I yielded to an impulse, which I often have, to talk with inanimate things and have them talk to me. It’s a ridiculous habit. It’s one I can’t overcome. As I looked at this little clump of stumps, there seemed to be a tear on each one, and I said, “What’s the matter, currant bush? What are you crying about?”

And I thought I heard that currant bush speak. It seemed to say, “How could you do this to me? I was making such wonderful growth. I was almost as large as the fruit tree and the shade tree, and now you have cut me down. And all in the garden will look upon me with contempt and pity. How could you do it? I thought you were the gardener here.”

I thought I heard that from the currant bush. I thought it so much that I answered it.

I said, "Look, little currant bush, I *am* the gardener here, and I know what I want you to be. If I let you go the way you want to go, you will never amount to anything. But someday, when you are laden with fruit, you are going to think back and say, 'Thank you, Mr. Gardener, for cutting me down, for loving me enough to hurt me.'"

Ten years passed, and I found myself in Europe. I had made some progress in the First World War in the Canadian army. In fact, I was a field officer, and there was only one man between me and the rank of general, which I had cherished in my heart for years. Then he became a casualty. And the day after, I received a telegram from London from General Turner, who was in charge of all Canadian officers. The telegram said, "Be in my office tomorrow morning at ten o'clock."

I puffed up. I called my special servant. (We called them "batmen" over there.) I said, "Polish my boots and my buttons. Make me look like a general, because I am going up tomorrow to be appointed."

He did the best he could with what he had to work on, and I went to London. I walked into the office of the general. I saluted him smartly, and he replied to my salute as higher officers usually do to juniors—sort of a "Get out of the way, worm." Then he said, "Sit down, Brown."

I was deflated. I sat down. And he said, "Brown, you are entitled to this promotion, but I cannot make it. You have qualified and passed the regulations, you have had the experience, and you are entitled to it in every way, but I cannot make this appointment."

Just then he went into the other room to answer a phone call, and I did what most every officer and man in the army would do under those circumstances: I looked over on his desk to see what my personal history sheet

showed. And I saw written on the bottom of that history sheet in large capital letters: "THIS MAN IS A MORMON."

Now at that time we were hated heartily in Britain, and I knew why he couldn't make the appointment. Finally he came back and said, "That's all, Brown."

I saluted him, less heartily than before, and went out. On my way back to Shorncliffe, 120 kilometers away, I thought every turn of the wheels that clacked across the rails was saying, "You're a failure. You must go home and be called a coward by those who do not understand."

And bitterness rose in my heart until I arrived, finally, in my tent, and I rather vigorously threw my cap on the cot, together with my Sam Browne belt. I clenched my fist, and I shook it at heaven, and I said, "How could you do this to me, God? I've done everything that I knew how to do to uphold the standards of the Church. I was making such wonderful growth, and now you've cut me down. How could you do it?"

And then I heard a voice. It sounded like my own voice, and the voice said, "I am the gardener here. I know what I want you to be. If I let you go the way you want to go, you will never amount to anything. And someday, when you are ripened in life, you are going to shout back across the time and say, 'Thank you, Mr. Gardener, for cutting me down, for loving me enough to hurt me.'"

Those words—which I recognize now as my words to the currant bush and that had become God's word to me—drove me to my knees, where I prayed for forgiveness for my arrogance and my ambition.

As I was praying there, I heard some Mormon boys in an adjoining tent singing the closing number to an M.I.A. session, which I usually attended with them. And I recognized these words, which all of you have memorized:

*It may not be on the mountain height
Or over the stormy sea;
It may not be at the battle's front
My Lord will have need of me;
But if, by a still, small voice he calls
To paths that I do not know,
I'll answer, dear Lord, with my hand in thine:
I'll go where you want me to go.*

...

*So trusting my all to thy tender care,
And knowing thou lovest me,
I'll do thy will with a heart sincere;
I'll be what you want me to be.
["It May Not Be on the Mountain Height,"
Hymns, 1948, no. 75]*

My young friends and brothers and sisters, will you remember that little experience that changed my whole life? Had the Gardener not taken control and done for me what was best for me, or if I had gone the way I wanted to go, I would have returned to Canada as a senior commanding officer of western Canada. I would have raised my family in a barracks. My six daughters would have had little chance to marry in the Church. I myself would probably have gone down and down. I do not know what might have happened, but this I know, and this I say to you and to Him in your presence,

looking back over sixty years: "Thank you, Mr. Gardener, for cutting me down."

Now I leave with you my testimony, and I received this testimony from the same source that Jesus said inspired Peter when he said, "Thou art the Christ."

Whatever undertakings may demand of you and of your attention, I tell you, young men and young women, you cannot make a better resolution today than this: "I am going to keep close to the Lord. I am going to understand Him better, and, understanding Him, I will understand myself and will try to put my life into harmony with His." For I have come to know that every man and every woman has potential godhood dwelling in him, for God is in reality the Father of us all.

I leave you my blessing: God bless these young people. They are looking forward hopefully and gleefully to the experiences of life. Oh, Father, be with and sustain them, uphold them, deepen their testimonies, keep them true to the faith and true to themselves. Father, bless them that they may live up to the best traditions of our country and be proud of the fact that they graduated from a Church-owned and Church-operated school, where they were taught these precious truths concerning the purpose of their life and their relationship to Deity, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.