

Remarks at Convocation
April 22, 2011
Stephen Jones

We thank all those who have contributed to this meeting, and are grateful for all of you who have made the effort to be here. Thank you for your attendance, and for the support you have provided these wonderful graduating students.

It's now my privilege to offer a few brief remarks before we close.

Recently I've been reading a book that contains the writing of classical Islamic scholars on "the philosophy of learning and education."¹ It is part of the Islamic Translation Series published here at BYU and contains works of eight scholars written between the ninth to the fourteenth centuries. Their writings include both philosophical and practical approaches to learning.

As I have read some of these passages, I have thought about each of you. Let me share some of the practical advice given.

On a day when we, your teachers, hope you will remember all you have learned here, the advice of one of these scholars, al-Zarnuji, on improving memory is this:

Rubbing the teeth, drinking honey and eating the incense plant with sugar as well as eating 21 raisins, red ones, on an empty stomach, create memory....²

If this strategy does not improve memory, I feel confident it would certainly *create* a memory for each of you who tried it.

Another topic taken up in these writings is the age-old question as to whether or not young men who have romantic relationships with young women are impeded in their learning. Al-Zarnuji quotes in his writings a poem about one young man who set aside the enticement of a beautiful young woman:

¹ Bradley J. Cook, *Classical Foundations of Islamic Educational Thought* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2010), ix.

² Cook, 150.

*Farewell greetings to her who enslaved me through her elegance,
The spendor of her cheeks, and the furtive glances of her eyes.*

*A charming young maiden captivated me and filled me with love.
Imagination is baffled by the attempt to describe her charms.*

*But I said [to her]" "Leave me alone and excuse me,
For indeed I have become enamored of the study of the fields of
knowledge and their unveiling.*

*And for me seeking science and learning and reverence for God
Suffice to keep me from the song of singing maidens and their
perfume."³*

At BYU, this would have to be a young man who has not yet served a mission, for after President Monson's recent priesthood conference talk any returned missionary needs to be pursuing singing maidens as much as science and learning. Brethren, I want you to note that in this college you will find more singing maidens than in any other!

Lest you think these scholars only gave advice about rules and practices that now seem quaint or quirky, let me assure you that is not the case. Their writings give powerful insights into the connection between learning and faith, connections deeply resonant with our doctrines and beliefs.

Here is one sentence that impresses me deeply:

Knowledge will not give part of itself to you until you give all of yourself to it...

I love this expression of a whole-souled sort of commitment to learning, learning that comes through sincere seeking and complete dedication.

For all of us, gaining knowledge is vital. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that "A man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge,"⁴ and the Lord

³ Cook, 178.

⁴ HC 4:588

teaches us in the Doctrine and Covenants that “if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come.”⁵

This scripture makes it plain that learning and knowledge are gained in two ways: diligence and obedience. This reinforced in Section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants, where we are told to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith.”⁶

This duality in both the acquisition of knowledge and in it’s very nature is consonant and beautifully expressed by many of the Islamic scholars in the book I mentioned earlier. Bradley J. Cook, the book’s compiler, writes in the introduction:

To ascertain truth by complete reliance on reason alone is restrictive, since spiritual and temporal reality are two sides of the same sphere. Indeed, the highest form of knowledge is the perception of God, which cannot be realized in any other way expect through faith. Revelatory knowledge is the most elevated form of knowledge not only because it relates to God and leads to an understanding of His attributes, but also because it provides an essential foundation for all other forms of knowledge.⁷

I love Cook’s statement that “the highest form of knowledge is the perception of God,” and love the expression of that very concept in this scripture:

If thou shalt ask, thou shalt receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge, that thou mayest know the mysteries and peaceable things—that which bringeth joy, that which bringeth life eternal.⁸

What a glorious invitation is offered us in these few words. God will answer our prayers by giving us knowledge and revelation, which will cause us to know the His mysteries and bring us the joy of eternal life!

⁵ D&C 130:18-19.

⁶ D&C 88:118.

⁷ Cook, p. xxvii.

⁸ D&C 42: 61.

Our prophets have consistently taught that the purposes of knowledge far exceed intellectual development alone, and this is echoed in the writing of these Islamic scholars, one of whom wrote:

The purpose of learning is to act by it, while the purpose of action is the abandoning of the perishable for that which lasts forever.⁹

Paul wrote to the Ephesians that there was something that exceeded knowledge, something that eclipsed it. It was “to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.”¹⁰

Today is Good Friday, the day on which we commemorate the Savior’s giving of His life on our behalf. Just prior to that great event, He prayed to His father, and, in so doing, taught us about the connection between eternal life and knowing Him. He said, “This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”¹¹

As you leave here today, we laud your growth, and encourage you to continue to learn, by study and faith, by diligence and obedience, seeking revelation upon revelation, and knowledge upon knowledge. And, above all, we encourage you to “know the love of Christ,” which passes all knowledge, so that His fullness, and the joy of eternal life which He alone offers, may be and abide in your forever.

We feel such gratitude you have come here to study, and confident that you will succeed. We pray you will be alumni who will reflect all that BYU stands for and whose influence in the arts and communications will lead – not merely follow - the styles and standards of excellence and creativity in the world.

We express our love toward and confidence in you. May you ever be blessed, and may all you do bring you, and those you love and serve, the knowledge and love of the Savior, I pray in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

⁹ Cook, 112.

¹⁰ Ephesians 3:19.

¹¹ John 16:3.