

LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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A Love Letter

Years ago, toward the end of an unforgettable semester, a beloved BYU professor invited our class to his house for a Saturday morning pancake breakfast. Spouses were invited too and, invited or not, we brought our infant daughter as well.

This professor was, and remains, one of my great heroes. And his wife was, if anything, even more impressive. She enveloped us all with her wide-ranging knowledge, her obvious intelligence, her perceptive kindness, and her palpable faith. Lia and I returned home that morning with a new mission in life. When we grew up, we resolved, we wanted to be just like John and Susan Tanner.

John has been my mentor and friend for most of my adult life. I owe him a debt I can never repay. Perhaps above all else, he has blessed me with a singular example and soaring ideal. Better than anyone else I have known, John has articulated and embodied the ideal of a disciple-scholar and the idea of Brigham Young University—our inherited aspirations and our legacy of dreams.

“BYU,” John once said, “has ever been built of dreams and ideals as much or more than of brick and mortar.”¹ To our incalculable collective blessing, John has now collected many of those dreams in a beautiful new anthology called *Envisioning BYU: Dreams and Foundations*, a copy of which was recently gifted to every BYU employee. Thanks to John,² BYU’s guiding stars and animating dreams now stand, in Dante’s phrase, “*legato con amore in un volume*”³—bound with love in a single volume.

Here are the sacred texts of our institutional tradition: from the sweeping curricular mandate of our canonized revelations⁴ to the staggering

prophecies of the Second Century Address.⁵ From our namesake’s prime directive that nothing be taught on this campus without the Spirit of God to his daughter’s remarkable testimony that “Christ Himself was directing and had a care over this school”⁶ and that “on several occasions . . . [He] has visited” it.⁷ From President John Taylor’s prophecy that someday “Zion will be as far ahead of the outside world in everything pertaining to learning of every kind as we are today in religious matters”⁸ to President Kevin Worthen’s stirring summons toward “inspiring learning.”⁹ Here are our inspired Mission¹⁰ and Aims¹¹ and more besides with more to come: this is the first volume of a projected three.

Each of the twenty-two messages in *Envisioning BYU* is lovingly and eloquently introduced by its editor. Two of John’s own talks serve as bookends to the volume, leaving the whole “fitly framed together” (Eph. 2:21)—a wondrous, luminous, harmonious whole.

When I began this series of monthly mini-essays, I promised myself they would not be overly preachy or unduly prescriptive. But please forgive me if I now make what I hope will be an isolated exception and wax unabashedly hortatory. I don’t think there is anything I could do as AAVP for faculty development that would bless this university and our students more abundantly and enduringly than if I could somehow persuade every member of our faculty to study *Envisioning BYU*—slowly and deeply, thoughtfully and prayerfully—from beginning to end. And so, my friends and colleagues, I plead—with all the energy of my heart and with italics, exclamations, and frantic all caps: *READ THIS BOOK!!!*

Envisioning BYU is a gift to our campus community and to future generations of BYU faculty and students. It is also something of a miracle. As John was finishing the first drafts of the manuscript, he was involved in a terrible bicycle accident that nearly cost him his life. His preservation and recovery have been nothing short of miraculous—a testament, I believe, to the reality of angels and the efficacy of prayer. Susan, indomitable as ever, adopted as a scriptural watchword for John’s rehabilitation: “Shall we not go on in so great a cause?” (D&C 128:22).

Part of that cause, for John, was *Envisioning BYU*. Sooner than was probably prudent, he was back at work on the manuscript, laboring heroically to bring it to completion and see it into print.

Knowing something of the precarious state of John’s health and the consecrated intensity of his efforts, I worried that he might overdo it. So I called to ask if there was anything I could do to help with the manuscript. He agreed to let me

review the draft and, in the interest of keeping it to a manageable length, suggest some cuts.

I don’t know that my suggestions contributed anything to the finished product, but I felt an almost indescribable sweetness as I pored over the manuscript—a sweetness that derived from the inspired truth of what I was reading, from my sense that I was enjoying a front-row seat to the making of BYU history, and from a nostalgic notion that somehow I had become John Tanner’s research assistant again.

February, an otherwise gloomy month, is brightened by Valentine’s Day—a time for lovers and love letters. *Envisioning BYU* is a love letter to our beloved alma mater from one of her most valiant sons. It is the work of a consummate professional and an irrepressible amateur—with *amateur* taken in the root sense of *lover* that John has elucidated and embodied so well.¹² It is a love letter to all of us and to our students—past, present, and future—from one of the greatest hearts and minds to ever grace this campus.

Happy reading.

¹ John S. Tanner, “‘One of the Great Lights of the World’: Seeking Learning by Study and Faith at BYU,” in John S. Tanner, *Learning in the Light: Selected Talks at BYU* (BYU Studies, 2017) 16.

² And thanks to his predecessors, Don Norton and Jack Welch, whose *Educating Zion* John has updated and expanded.

³ Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, XXXIII.86.

⁴ “The Basic Constitution of Church Education” in John S. Tanner (ed), *Envisioning BYU: Foundations and Dreams* (Brigham Young University, 2022) 3-9.

⁵ Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University” in *ibid* 43-61.

⁶ Zina P. Young Williams Card, “Accepted in the Heavens” in *ibid* 156. Dean Card was here reporting

words spoken by her father, Brigham Young, in a vision reported to her by President John Taylor.

⁷ *Ibid* 157.

⁸ John Taylor, “Everything Pertaining to Learning” in *ibid* 145.

⁹ Kevin J Worthen, “Inspiring Learning” in *ibid* 85-100.

¹⁰ “The Mission of Brigham Young University” in *ibid* 63-66.

¹¹ “The Aims of a BYU Education” in *ibid* 69-82.

¹² See John S. Tanner, “Notes from an Amateur on Academic Excellence” in *Learning in the Light*, 3-14; John S. Tanner, *Notes from an Amateur: A Disciple’s Life in the Academy* (BYU Religious Studies Center & Deseret Book, 2011).