

LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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“Good, Better, Best” at BYU

For more than a quarter century, I have been a careful student of everything I could find from the tongue or pen of President Dallin H. Oaks. As a teenager, as a missionary, and as an undergraduate, I was inspired by the clarity of his teaching and the precision of his prose—by the depth of his doctrinal insight and the power of his witness for Christ. As a law student, law clerk, and law professor, and now as a university administrator, I have looked to him as a model of disciple-scholarship—as one who rose to the very top of his (and my) profession while remaining unequivocally loyal to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. By example and by precept, he has blessed my life in immeasurable and enduring ways.

With President Oaks’s recent call to preside as the prophet and president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I have felt impressed to reread (or re-listen to) his general conference addresses, his BYU devotional messages, and his published books. I’m not done yet, but it has already been an exhilarating, transformative experience. I have been nourished, inspired, and fortified. Many of President Oaks’s messages bear directly on our work at BYU. I hope to highlight one of them briefly here.

In October 2007, Elder Oaks spoke of his childhood encounters with the Sears, Roebuck catalog, in which some merchandise was displayed with “three degrees of quality: good, better, and best. For example, some men’s shoes were labeled *good* (\$1.84), some *better* (\$2.98), and some *best* (\$3.45).” Elder Oaks then used this memorable framework as a guide for our focus and priorities. “Just because something is *good*,” he warned, “is not a sufficient reason for doing it. The number of good things we can do far exceeds

the time available to accomplish them. Some things are better than good, and these are the things that should command priority attention in our lives.”

And again: “As we consider various choices, we should remember that it is not enough that something is good. Other choices are better, and still others are best.”

And finally: “We have to forego some good things in order to choose others that are better or best because they develop faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and strengthen our families.”¹

We have to forego some good things. That is a hard lesson for conscientious people to apply. It certainly has been difficult for me. I have struggled over the years, and I continue to struggle, with letting go of good things.

Years ago, I spent 30 minutes each night reading books in foreign languages, cycling month by month through Italian, German and French.

In another season, I spent a few minutes each day writing poetry and a few more minutes reading poetry.

At another time—just before I was invited to join the university administration—I was joyfully immersed in a major research and writing project that I saw as a kind of magnum opus. I felt I was finally hitting my stride as a constitutional historian and scholar.

All of these “good things” have now been set aside, or seriously modified, so I can focus on the “better” and “best” things that I believe are the Lord’s priorities for me in this season of my life. In moments of clarity, I feel great peace about those current priorities. I relish the work that I am doing at home and in the university, and I feel the

sweet exhilaration of letting God prevail. But there are also occasional pangs of regret at letting go of very good things that I truly loved.

There is an institutional application of these principles. I am now in my fourth year as a university administrator, and one of the things that impresses me with increasing force is that we really struggle as a university to stop doing good things. We plant, cultivate, and harvest with unremitting zeal. But we rarely pause to prune.

I see global evidence of this in an extravagant proliferation of programs (we have more Classification of Instruction Program [CIP] codes on this campus than any other university in America) and in relentless expansion within programs. Every year we propose scores of new courses (or quietly pilot them as flex courses), but we rarely eliminate old ones.

I also see individual evidence of this trend in faculty who feel overworked and stretched thin—who continue to take on new projects and to join

additional initiatives but who rarely cut back on preexisting engagements.

I don't think these patterns are sustainable or wise. In the work of this large and complex university, many things are good, but others are better or best because they advance more powerfully our core mission of strengthening students "in their quest for perfection and eternal life."²

Wise stewards are good pruners. And pruning does not mean clearing out dead wood or yanking out weeds. Pruning is the painful work of cutting back good, live growth to make space for growth that is better or best. Pruning brings the pangs of foregoing good things.

If we are to become the Christ-centered, prophetically directed university of prophecy, we will need to stop doing some good things. In a world of mortal limitations, we will need to devote our time and resources to the best things—those that "develop faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and strengthen our [students]."³

¹ Dallin H. Oaks, "Good, Better, Best," *Ensign*, November 2007.

² "The Mission of Brigham Young University."

³ Oaks, "Good, Better, Best."