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Commencement Remarks
Southern Virginia University
May 2, 2019

Gather. Lift. Launch.¹ What a great description of the role of a liberal arts college. Over the last four years, you have gathered at Southern Virginia University with the purpose of lifting one another. There is something special about the gathering and lifting that takes place at a university. Given his prophetic mantle, I think it remarkable that Henry B. Eyring observed, “Universities . . . are probably as good a way we know of to find truth.”²

The gathering and lifting that has taken place for you on this campus ends today. Today is about the launch. And that’s where I come in. If I play well my part, I will be able to pass along to you important life lessons learned from an old man who is battered and scarred but not defeated!

When one thinks of a launch, the image that comes to mind most readily is a giant rocket lifting off from Cape Canaveral, pushing its payload past earth’s gravity into space; perhaps to visit the moon or another planet, or venture beyond our solar system. Or as my almost two-year old grandson Emmett Strong would put it, using the words of his hero, Buzz Lightyear: “To infinity and beyond!” Exciting stuff.

But for disciples of Christ, there is another image that comes to mind. In his first words to Peter, Jesus told the fisherman, “launch out into the deep.”³ From the setting, it’s clear that the primary purpose of the Lord’s instruction was simple and straightforward. “Hey Peter! Move your boat away from the shore and out into the Sea of Galilee so that you can catch more fish.”

But as is almost always the case when reading closely the carefully constructed narratives of the Four Gospels, much more is going on here than first meets the eye. As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland observes, “Peter could not have known the ever-widening circles that single command would make in the stream of his plain and simple life. He was launching out . . . into that limitless sea of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”⁴

¹ *About*, S. VA. UNIV., <http://svu.edu/about> (last visited May 7, 2019).

² Sharon Haddock, *LDS Leader Speaks on Learning, Religion*, DESERET NEWS (Feb. 28, 2009), <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/705287773/LDS-leader-speaks-on-learning-religion.html>.

³ *Luke* 5:4 (King James).

⁴ Jeffrey R. Holland, *The Lengthening Shadow of Peter*, ENSIGN (Sept. 1975), <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/1975/09/the-lengthening-shadow-of-peter>.

Taking a cue from Elder Holland, what follows is my advice about how best to take the lessons you have learned from the gathering and lifting you've experienced at Southern Virginia University and "launch out into the deep."

"The deep" sounds a bit scary, doesn't it? And truth be told, life after college is a bit scary. There are three aspects of "the deep" you now face that I will address. Warning: two of them are a bit scary. But good news: the third one is actually pretty exciting.

I

One hundred years from now cultural historians teaching about our time will assign their students a monumental work that was published when you were in grade school. Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* is a nearly 800-page look into a question that describes what is, without doubt, the most significant change to our world in the last 500 years: "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in 1500, while in 2019 many in the developed world find it almost impossible to believe in God?"⁵

Recently, the Pew Research Center reported that the fastest growing religious group in America today is those who are affiliated with no religion. In the 1950s, members of this group made up only 2% of the population of the United States.⁶ Twenty years later, in the 1970s, they were still only 7% of the population.⁷ Today they are 23% and make up 1/3rd of adults under 30.⁸ For the record, that's roughly the same percentage of the population who identify as either evangelical Christians or Catholics.⁹ And as Jana Riess points out in her recently published book, *The Next Mormons*, activity rates among millennials in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are anywhere between 30% on the low end to 62% on the high end.¹⁰ In short, all is not well in Zion.

⁵ CHARLES TAYLOR, *A SECULAR AGE* 25 (2007) ("[W]hy was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?").

⁶ See David Johnson, *See How Americans' Belief in God Has Changed Over 70 Years*, TIME (Apr. 7, 2016), <http://time.com/4283975/god-belief-religion-americans>.

⁷ "Nones" on the Rise, PEW RES. CTR. (Oct. 9, 2012), <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise>.

⁸ Michael Lipka, *A closer look at America's rapidly growing religious 'nones'*, PEW RES. CTR. (May 13, 2015), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones>.

⁹ *Religious Landscape Study*, PEW RES. CTR., <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study> (last visited May 7, 2019).

¹⁰ JANA RIESS, *THE NEXT MORMONS: HOW MILLENNIALS ARE CHANGING THE LDS CHURCH* (2019); see Jana Riess, *How many Millennials are really leaving the LDS Church?* RELIGION NEWS SERV. (Mar. 27, 2019), <https://religionnews.com/2019/03/27/how-many-millennials-are-really-leaving-the-lds-church>.

But the education you have received at SVU will put you in good stead to fight back against this force in your own life and in the lives of those you love and serve. You have learned the truth of what Jacob Neusner, the prodigious rabbi-scholar of Judaism, said in a lecture I attended in college that changed my life: “Skepticism and critical thinking are friends, not enemies of religion. Man is made in God’s image. And that part of man which is like God is the mind. When we use our minds, we not only serve God, we also act like God. In seeking reason and order, we serve God.”¹¹

To be sure, today there are strong currents running against the life of faith, but there is also an ocean of insight supplied over the millennia by thoughtful men and women who have used their best thinking and their best living to discover the truth of what the Lord taught Joseph Smith in the span of just six weeks in the spring of 1829. During that time, the Lord gave Joseph four revelations that described to the young prophet how the Holy Ghost teaches us truth. In each of these revelations, the Lord explains that the Holy Ghost works upon our mind.¹² And in three of them, He explains that the Holy Ghost works upon our heart in tandem with our mind.¹³ The one serves as a check on the other. Rational inquiry is needed, but alone it is insufficient and may lead to arrogance. The heart is likewise indispensable, but without the direction of reason, it may lead to recklessness.

So here comes your first assignment as you “launch out into the deep.” (I should have warned you that there would be homework.) You know the fiction of C. S. Lewis. You grew up with the *Chronicles of Narnia*. But now it’s time for you read his non-fiction: *Mere Christianity*, *The Problem of Pain*, *The Great Divorce*, *The Weight of Glory*. And study the works of other disciple-scholars both in our tradition and outside of our tradition who see no conflict between faith and reason, between belief and the scientific method.

Next assignment. It’s time to get serious about your study of scripture. Memorizing inspirational passages and decorating your room with uplifting posters is all well and good. Keep doing that. I still do! But as Paul teaches us, there is a time to become an adult in our discipleship.¹⁴ If you grew up watching the Book of Mormon cartoon videos, good for your parents. But now it’s time to read Terry L. Givens, Grant Hardy,

¹¹ JACOB NEUSNER, *THE GLORY OF GOD IS INTELLIGENCE: FOUR LECTURES ON THE ROLE OF INTELLECT IN JUDAISM* 1-4 (1978).

¹² *THE DOCTRINE & COVENANTS OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS* 6: 22-23; 8:2-3; 9:8-9; 11:12 (2013) [hereinafter D&C].

¹³ *Id.* 6: 22-23; 8:2-3; 9:8-9.

¹⁴ 1 *Corinthians* 13:11 (New Revised Standard) (“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”).

Royal Skousen, Jack Welch, Joseph Spencer, Adam Miller, Eugene England, Patrick Mason¹⁵ and other disciple-scholars who have applied critical skills they gained world-class universities to the serious study of the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and other Restoration scripture. That's hard work and can't be done by simply reading a few verses of scripture a day. But you can do hard things.

Jim Faulconer is a professor of philosophy at BYU. While working on his PhD at Penn State, he asked a rabbi-scholar to be his tutor as Jim studied the book of Genesis. To show his seriousness, Jim proposed to the rabbi that they spend the entire semester reading only Genesis, which is less than 60 pages in most English translations. The rabbi's response startled Jim. "Impossible! There's no way we can get through Genesis in only a semester. If we work very hard, at most we might be able to get through the first chapter." And they did, but Jim reports that, even then, the rabbi felt rushed. Incidentally, based on that experience and a lifetime of reading texts closely, Jim has written a series of books for members of the Church on how to engage in a close reading of scripture. One of them is titled, *The New Testament Made Harder*.¹⁶

The bad news is that close reading takes time and effort. The good news is that becoming expert in the serious scholarship that has been devoted to the study of scripture will deepen the roots of your faith so that you can stand against the hurricane-force winds of secularism.

II

Last year, Professor Amy Chua of Yale Law School published a book titled *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations*.¹⁷ Professor Chua began her research for the book thinking that she would offer a critique that American foreign policy in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq had failed to take adequate account of the tribal loyalties that

¹⁵ See, e.g., FIONA GIVENS & TERRY L. GIVENS, *THE CHRIST WHO HEALS* (2017); TERRY L. GIVENS, *BY THE HAND OF MORMON* (2003); TERRY L. GIVENS, *THE BOOK OF MORMON: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION* (2009); TERRY L. GIVENS & FIONA GIVENS, *THE GOD WHO WEEPS* (2012); TERRY L. GIVENS, *WRESTLING THE ANGEL* (2015); GRANT HARDY, *UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK OF MORMON* (2010); ROYAL SKOUSEN, *THE BOOK OF MORMON: THE EARLIEST TEXT* (2009); JOHN W. WELCH, *CHIASMUS IN ANTIQUITY* (1998); JOHN W. WELCH, *ILLUMINATING THE SERMON AT THE TEMPLE AND THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT* (1998); JOSEPH M. SPENCER, *AN OTHER TESTAMENT ON TYPOLOGY* (2016); ADAM S. MILLER, *LETTERS TO A YOUNG MORMON* (2014); EUGENE ENGLAND, *WHY THE CHURCH IS AS TRUE AS THE GOSPEL* (1986); PATRICK Q. MASON, *PLANTED: BELIEF AND BELONGING IN AN AGE OF DOUBT* (2015).

¹⁶ JAMES E. FAULCONER, *THE NEW TESTAMENT MADE HARDER* (2015); see also JAMES E. FAULCONER, *THE BOOK OF MORMON MADE HARDER* (2014); JAMES E. FAULCONER, *THE DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS MADE HARDER* (2013); JAMES E. FAULCONER, *THE OLD TESTAMENT MADE HARDER* (2014).

¹⁷ AMY CHUA, *POLITICAL TRIBES: GROUP INSTINCT AND THE FATE OF NATIONS* (2018).

were the most important indicators of political commitments. But while doing her research, she realized that the political tribalism that divided these other countries had taken root in our own.¹⁸

Now I'm going to sound like a cranky old man, like your gray-haired neighbor who yells at you for playing in his yard. In my view, the political tribalism that has not only taken root in America but seems to define our public life, presents the greatest threat to the Republic in my lifetime. And my lifetime has included the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Watergate, race riots, the assassination of a president and other major political figures, and the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Let me not put too fine a point on this: Whether the Republic pulls out of this death-spiral is, in my view, an open question.

Not long ago, Yale Law School asked me to join a panel discussion titled "Mormonism in American Law and Politics" along with two distinguished scholars who have written with insight and even admiration about the experience of Latter-day Saints.¹⁹ As the lone member of the Church on the panel, I tried to offer an insider's view. But rather than speak about the past, I made a claim about the future that was intended to surprise the audience: Latter-day Saints are uniquely positioned to help negotiate the tension between our nation's twin goals of liberty and equality—a tension that sometimes seems irreconcilable especially when the right to be from discrimination because of one's sexual orientation collides with the right to live in public the principles of one's religious faith.

Here's how. The late Catholic scholar Stephen H. Webb got it right when he wrote, "Mormonism is obsessed with Christ, and everything that it teaches is meant to awaken, encourage, and expand faith in him."²⁰ But Webb's description is incomplete. To Latter-day Saints, the Atonement of Christ not only forges a bond between an individual and God; the Atonement of Christ is at the center of our efforts to create community. Latter-day Saints don't use much iconography, but if any symbol expresses who we are and what we are about, it's the beehive, because our paramount form of religious expression is building community.

¹⁸ See generally *id.* at 1-13.

¹⁹ *Debating Law and Religion Series: Mormonism in American Law and Politics*, YALE L. SCH. (held Apr. 5, 2017), <https://law.yale.edu/yls-today/yale-law-school-events/debating-law-and-religion-series-mormonism-american-law-and-politics>.

²⁰ Stephen H. Webb, *Mormonism Obsessed with Christ*, FIRST THINGS (Feb. 2012), <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/02/mormonism-obsessed-with-christ>.

It's within the Latter-day Saint ward that much of that hard work takes place.²¹ Each Sunday we gather with our ward to partake of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The symbolism of that ritual binds us one to another. When we partake of the sacrament, we share the emblems of Christ's suffering with one another. That sharing is an outward manifestation of an inner commitment that we "are willing to bear one another's burdens, . . . mourn with those that mourn . . . , and comfort those that stand in need of comfort";²² to go to Young Women's camp, Scout camp, and youth conference; to help people move their household on a Saturday morning in the cold rain and to minister to one another, especially to those on the margins of society. We receive the bread and water not from our leaders but from whoever happens to be next to us on the pew—a beautiful expression of the powerful idea that C. S. Lewis used to close his most important sermon: "Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses."²³

This may be where we can be of special help to our divided nation. Latter-day Saints have a sense that we have a role to play in defending and preserving the Constitution of the United States, and we teach one another to study its text and history. That is all good. But I wonder, is there something even more basic that we can offer? I think there is.

I applaud political discourse that is rooted and grounded in the Constitution, but it seems to me that much of our argument about the Constitution fails to account for a startling reality. The Constitution is about something even more fundamental than the structure of government and its processes. The fundamental impulse that created the Constitution in the summer of 1787 was the deliberate decision to create union. The Constitution assumes a people who want to be together. It is about a decision to unite with others to try and create a society based on shared values of liberty and equality. We will vigorously disagree with each other over the content of these values and what to do when they come into conflict, but we will stay together even as we argue about their meaning. As our greatest president said at the time of the Republic's greatest peril, "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have

²¹ As Eugene England pointed out, two features of the ward work together to create a laboratory for Christian living. First, with no paid help, all are called upon to pitch in. Second, because we are members of a ward because of where we live and not because of a hankering to be among those who share all of our sensibilities, we end up working in close quarters with and eventually coming to love people we might not have wanted to take to lunch when we first met them. ENGLAND, *supra* note 15, at 6.

²² *Mosiah* 18:8-9 (Book of Mormon).

²³ C. S. LEWIS, *The Weight of Glory*, in *THE WEIGHT OF GLORY AND OTHER ADDRESSES* 25, 46 (HarperCollins 2001).

strained it must not break our bonds of affection.”²⁴ *And because of these bonds of affection we will compromise so that we can accommodate others for the sake of union.* In my view, that is the most fundamental principle of the Constitution, and without that commitment, the Constitution will not survive.

As Michael Gerson observes, “The heroes of America are heroes of unity. Our political system is designed for vigorous disagreement. It is not designed for irreconcilable contempt. Such contempt loosens the ties of citizenship and undermines the idea of patriotism.”²⁵

Times of change like our own are marked by turmoil and anxiety, making it tempting to lash out in anger and frustration and then seek shelter by retreating to our own tribe of like-minded folk on our favorite websites or cable news network. But I don’t think that is what the Lord calls us to do in the Restoration. I believe that He wants us to join with others and become agents of reconciliation in a divided world. The concept expressed in the English word reconciliation has Hebrew roots. When it appears in the Hebrew Bible, it conveys the sense of bringing together into one things that have been separated. The King James translators used a new word for the concept: atonement, or “at-one-ment.”²⁶ The people of the beehive, a people who know how to build community, need to bring what we have learned from our experience as missionaries, as home and visiting teachers, as members of the ward council, to bless this nation at this troubled moment.

III

Enough of the dark side of “the deep.” After all, truth be told, we live in the most exciting time in the history of the world. As Steven Pinker has been trying to persuade us, since the dawn of the Enlightenment and its use of the scientific method (and, I would add, the dawn of democratic capitalism), much about life on this planet has gotten better — much better.²⁷ You live in the safest time in the history of the world. There is less violence now than ever. Literacy rates have never been higher. Infectious disease, famine, and malnutrition are on the decline. Today, more people live longer,

²⁴ Abraham Lincoln, *First Inaugural Address—Final Text* (Mar. 4, 1861), in 4 THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN 262, 271 (Roy P. Basler ed., 1953).

²⁵ Michael Gerson, *A Short A Primer on Political Reality*, REAL CLEAR POLS. (Feb. 19, 2010), https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2010/02/19/a_short_primer_on_political_reality_104476.html.

²⁶ *Atonement*, KING JAMES BIBLE ONLINE, <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Atonement.php4> (last visited May 7, 2019).

²⁷ See STEVEN PINKER, ENLIGHTENMENT NOW: THE CASE FOR REASON, SCIENCE, HUMANISM, AND PROGRESS 3-6 (2019).

healthier, and more prosperous lives than ever before. And although there is much, much work yet to be done, in the developed world, things have never been better for women, racial minorities, and our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. All is not well and we are faced with daunting challenges, but, as Pinker asserts, “[P]rogress is a demonstrable fact. . . . [A]ppreciating the progress . . . gives us the courage and conviction to try to strive for more progress.”²⁸

As you “launch out into the deep,” may I suggest your whole-hearted involvement with a start-up that is, I believe, the most exciting enterprise in the world today. And you don’t need to move to Silicon Valley to get in on the action. That enterprise, of course, is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

For the last few years, I’ve been involved in a project that seeks to put believing Latter-day Saint scholars into conversation with those whose faith is wavering. As a result, I have had a few opportunities to work closely with some members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Allow me some observations from that interaction.

First, they really believe! That shouldn’t come as a surprise, but it has deeply moved this skeptic, who has been influenced by a life in the hardball world of politics and governance in Washington, DC, to see up-close that they really believe that they have been called by the Lord to help prepare the Church to prepare the world for the Second Coming of Christ.

Second, they know that we have much work to do because the Church is not yet all that it can be or that it needs to be. They examine everything we do in the Church to figure out how we can do it better. As I heard one of them say, “We have got to do a better job of getting the Gospel down into the hearts of our people.” And how do they go about sizing up what we are doing and trying to make things better? I imagine that they spend a great deal of time in prayer. But I know they spend a great deal of time analyzing data. They analyze issues from every angle. They are spiritual, to be sure, but from what I can tell, there isn’t a mystic in the group. They are pragmatists, doing their best to make the Church better—to get the Gospel down into the hearts of people.

Do they always get it right? Of course not. Sometimes they get it right. Other times not. That’s how revelation works. Step by step and not always forward!²⁹ Some look at that

²⁸ Karen Weintraub, *Steven Pinker Thinks the Future is Looking Bright*, N.Y. TIMES (Nov. 19, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/19/science/steven-pinker-future-science.html>.

²⁹ See, e.g., D. Todd Christofferson, *The Doctrine of Christ*, ENSIGN (May 2012), <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/2012/05/sunday-morning-session/the-doctrine-of-christ>; Jeffrey R. Holland, *Lord, I Believe*, ENSIGN (May 2013), <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/2013/05/sunday-afternoon->

process and lose faith, but such a reaction misapprehends how the Lord works with his fallen children. It's always been a messy process.

The perfecting of the Church is an urgent task and the most exciting enterprise in the world today. Elder Neal A. Maxwell got it right when he spoke of "the high adventure of orthodoxy."³⁰ But as the Lord warned us in his first revelation to the newly-restored Church, it's hard work that takes "all patience and faith."³¹ My hope is that those frustrated by the gap between what the Church now is and what it may yet become will stay and put their shoulder to the wheel in this audacious project. I am convinced, based on my reason, my experience, and the persistent witness of the Spirit that the Church is connected to the powers of heaven in a real way.

Now here's the part where you and I come in. Revelation for the Church doesn't involve only our leaders. Scripture is clear on this point. Revelation for the Church comes from the questions we ask and the way we respond to life's' challenges when we are doing our best to make the Gospel work in our lives and in the lives of others.

Now, for my last assignment as you "launch out into the deep": stay committed and involved in the unfolding wonder of the Restoration. Quite simply, *you need the Church*. *You need* the connection with the spiritual world that is available through the ordinances and covenants of the Gospel. *You need* the links that are made by covenant with family and members and that are forged through loving service. *You need* the ongoing apostolic witness that Jesus is the Christ.

But the Church also needs you. The Church needs thoughtful women and men to help steer its course and help it become what it can be but is not yet. *The Church needs* your commitment to become a place that more clearly reflects a Christ-like love for humankind than we have yet achieved.

Gather. Lift. Launch. May God bless you as you "launch out into the deep." In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

session/lord-i-believe; Dieter F. Uchtdorf, *Come, Join with Us*, ENSIGN (Nov. 2013), <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/2013/11/saturday-morning-session/come-join-with-us>.

³⁰ Elder Neal A. Maxwell, *Spiritual Ecology*, NEW ERA (Feb. 1975), <https://www.lds.org/study/new-era/1975/02/spiritual-ecology>.

³¹ D&C 21:5.