I. Our collective connections

Since I began serving as dean I have made it a point to try, when schedule allows, to visit you in your offices. It has given me a chance to get to know you better, to get a feel for the variety of ways you decorate your space [SLIDE] and to see what books, art, family photos, and other things you cherish. [SLIDE] The books, in particular, have taught me something I’d like to share.

I still remember being fascinated by the books on my own professors’ shelves both as an undergraduate and, even more so, as a graduate student. These were both the tools of the trade and, I assumed, works each professor knew by heart, had read many times, and thumbed through during all those long hours of serious contemplation they had in their offices. (How little I knew then…)

I’ve noticed that, in nearly every office that I have so far visited, I have managed to find lurking on the shelves somewhere a book I have in my own office library [SLIDE] CLICK (and this excludes the Bible, Book of Mormon, or the annual CES Christmas books…). The first few times I noticed this it didn’t really surprise me because our disciplines were interconnected. CLICK/CLICK However, as I broadened my visits to colleagues whose specialties lie well outside mine I was still finding books that lurked on my shelves, too. [SLIDE] /CLICK This got me thinking. [SLIDE] /CLICK What does this sharing of books signify? Is it profound, or just a ho-hum statistical probability? I am still finding myself puzzling over this each time I visit a colleague’s office.

What do our bookshelves tell others—students and colleagues—about us? [SLIDE] They can be seen as trophy cases, perhaps, proudly displaying our gold, silver, and bronze medals in sprint and long-distance reading that we have garnered during our scholarly lifetimes. Or, more like Hemingway, they may represent another kind of trophy space where we display the various animals that we bagged during our graduate school safari, such as the “Chomskyan cheetah,” the “Derridian dingo,” or the “Žižekian Žebra.” [SLIDE] Perhaps we approach them as acquisitive collectors do, with an entire row [SLIDE] of “The Complete Works of Squiggly Japanese-Named Guy,” or PMLA (in chronological order, of course), standing at attention on the shelf. Or maybe we just have a bunch of books thrown together [SLIDE] in the hope that we will get to them someday when we
have a few hours to ourselves in our offices (don’t hold your breath).

When I first started visiting offices, in the early throes of deanhood, and began to see familiar books I even ambitiously imagined all of us visiting and connecting each other’s office libraries and coming up with a cool graphic, like this one [SLIDE], (using the fabulous skills of the office of Digital Humanities, of course) to show how connected we each are. I wanted to graphically illustrate the ties that books afford us, since for many of us books are a kind of window to our intellectual soul, a place where we find community and connection with other thinking and articulating souls.

A couple of weeks ago I was in Phil Snyder’s office talking administrative shop when I noticed the same Norman Maclean book that I owned sitting on his shelf.

“Did you like that book?” I asked.

“Yes, I did. Norman MacLean is like the Bible in my family…” he replied, and after ten more minutes of the kind of warm, charged conversation that only happens in the atmosphere of our offices I left with an offprint by Phil that I am now savoring, and a new perspective on a beloved author.

I would like you, in your minds this morning, to imagine yourself in the office of a colleague you will visit later this week. Think about what book or books you might already share in common. Once you’ve made that connection, think about how that book connects you. Perhaps it is a love for the author, the book’s thesis or main argument, or its importance in the disciplinary heritage? It could be that it was something everyone was reading, back then, in graduate school, or perhaps it is a novel that still stirs both of your souls. The departmental and disciplinary siloes we contain ourselves in most of the time can likewise limit our collegiality. However, it takes very little scratching of any of our surfaces to reveal our souls’ similarities.

Consider this, then, the first point in my remarks, reflecting something profound that I have come to see during my first year: We in the college are engaged in a more common enterprise than we think, and are much more alike than we are different. And books, for many of us, are bridges to our souls.

II. Restoration and imagination

Speaking of books, our libraries can be contained on shelves in our offices thanks to the vision of Aldo Manuzio, [SLIDE] the Venetian printer who came up with the idea of portable small editions of classics for popular consumption. John Rosenberg has, on several occasions in the past, invoked the Latin phrase festina lente, “make haste, slowly,” from Manuzio’s favorite logo of the
dolphin and anchor. [SLIDE] When I was at an exhibit of Manuzio’s work in Venice this summer I learned about one of the great moments in the history of Western humanities. Here’s a quotation from one of the explanatory panels in the exhibition: [SLIDE] “The interrelations between expressions of religious devotion and Humanist culture became a distinctive feature of some of the most interesting art patrons in Venice at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries, and this comes through in their predilection for a sophisticated language inspired by antique art.” Early humanists expressed their evolving views using religious language and imagery in quite sophisticated language. That predilection, I learned, was based, in large part, upon their ability to imagine the classical world in terms as cosmically broad as they did Christianity, and seek to rise to that world’s challenge. In 1503 Venetian poet Pietro Bembo (1470-1547) [SLIDE] conjured up an imaginary conversation between two humanists from the previous generation. Standing before a mutilated statue they complain about the cruel way time has handed down both art and texts. /CLICK Their conclusion, in a nutshell: It was their duty to restore them!

Archeology feels a similar duty, to use material evidence to reconstruct culture and history. /CLICK The exhibit I attended itself reflected this archeological imperative: to conserve, to understand, to restore.

It seems to me that there is an inherent human inclination to ponder lost civilizations, cultures, languages, and art. [SLIDE] Hamlet contemplates Yorick’s skull; /CLICK Shelly /CLICK and Horace Smith /CLICK write dueling sonnets to a newly-acquired bust of Ramses II in the British Museum; Basho writes a haiku about the grass now growing where warriors once fought. Imagination is a core component of all humanities disciplines. It links in with the archeological imperative because we seek to preserve, to comprehend, and to restore.

One of the great privileges we have in the college is to be able to use our imaginations to restore the past into our students’ and readers’ minds, to translate and adapt, to share what we have discovered with others, in a language and idiom they can comprehend. This act ties us to them in distinct and potentially life-long bonds as we share the process of learning together, one of the most exhilarating experiences we can have in life.

And, in a similar way, as we share our own spiritual journeys with others, both in the classroom and in other contexts, we restore our own faith and build faith in others. This, too, is a mutual learning experience, one that has the potential to create lasting, even eternal, ties, and through which we underscore our common belief in another kind of Restoration that speaks as a voice from the dust, inviting us to imagine a God whose infinite love is beyond description.
III. Who stands guard? / Hold High the Torch

This summer I also had the opportunity, along with several colleagues from the College, to attend a comparative literature conference in Vienna. The opening session took place in the main building of the University of Vienna, and included a coffee break in the courtyard. After a bit of wandering through the spacious and regal halls, and up and down grand staircases, I realized that it was, in a rough way, similar in layout to our own JFSB. Its main entrance faces east, and as one enters through that section there is an open courtyard into which face multiple levels of rooms, classrooms, and offices. [SLIDE] And there are arches, a water source, and some modern art as well in the courtyard.

I was struck once more by the notion that, historically, in European universities the sense of architecture and place was an integral part of the education, with lofty, soaring ceilings symbolizing the ambitions of the faculty and the potential of the students. [SLIDE] Large paintings, vaulted ceilings, the play of light all comprised an edifice symbolizing advantage and a template for what one would inherit and was being trained to pass along. These spaces of learning were purposefully designed to underscore grand truths and concepts even as they reinforced a sense of privilege and power that an education bestowed upon its graduates.

As I wandered and wondered at the beauty of the space I overheard someone who appeared to be a professor there telling a well-heeled guest that above the lofty entrance hall sat the rector’s offices, symbolically “guarding” the entrance. This brought me up short (and, believe me, I know what short is!), as I thought, “Wait, my office is in that same location in reference to our college. Who am I guarding, and from what am I guarding them?” I began to think about other situations where guardians play a role. In feng shui, for example, one always likes to have mountains to the northeast to guard the city from demons who invade from that direction (Provo has great feng shui, by the way). Traditional rooftops in Japan are capped by onigawara demon tiles standing guard, [SLIDE] and both Greek and Egyptian temples have their Sphinx. So, I thought, perhaps my role as guardian is to keep out academic demons such as textbooks buyers, newspaper reporters, policy police, etc. And I try to do that, believe me. But I think now that my role as guardian is more than just to keep bad things out. It is also to minimize the bureaucratic machinery of the university infringing on your time, and to help create a space for you, as teachers and scholars, to have the resources and support you need to do the things you do so well: teach and study, by learning and by faith.

I’m still pondering the question of what my role as “guardian” of the college is, and I invite you
to ask that in your own capacity. Do you sit symbolically beside the door of your classroom, keeping out evil, protecting your students? From what, or whom, are you protecting them? How do you see your role in a world that, for them, is becoming increasingly difficult to negotiate?

During our first College convocation, held in May 1966, Gerrit de Jong, Jr., [SLIDE] professor of Portuguese and namesake of the concert hall in the HFAC, delivered the faculty address to graduates. He concluded his remarks with the following words: [SLIDE] Be a living example, not just a theoretical advocate of enduring human values. Hold high the torch. Act, not just talk, as one who has discovered some of the best of man's thoughts and creations.

In the spirit of a finale to our year-long celebration of the 50th anniversary of the college of humanities, I'd like to echo Prof. de Jong's sage advice to graduates, now offering it as timely advice to us in the College. He advocates being a living example, in contrast to a theoretical advocate of enduring human values. Personally, much of what I've learned over the past 15 months as dean is how important it is, in our latter-day world, to be an advocate of enduring human values. Yet I hadn't given too much thought to the “living example” part until our spring college retreat to which George Handley has just alluded. We are, perhaps, more comfortable as theoretical advocates, but what we learned in the retreat was that how we live, or at least the example of living that our students perceive us projecting, has a deep and abiding power in their lives, as well as in the lives of our colleagues and even peers outside Provo.

“Hold high the torch,” he says, alluding to both the Statue of Liberty and Christ's injunction that we not hide our candle under a bushel. I think for most of the college's history we've been content to emit a modest, friendly, ember-ish glow to cheer up those poor struggling seafarers who are adrift on the relativistic waves that constitute our contemporary moral universe. What the Humanities Center has proven is that, notwithstanding our weaknesses, we are better poised to light, and hold aloft, a torch than perhaps we have ever been before. On Monday Elder Clark called BYU “a great shining light in the Kingdom,” and I believe we are poised, and will be blessed, to hold high our respective torches as we seek to rise to the potential God sees in us, both individually and collectively.

“Act, not just talk, as one who has discovered some of the best of man's thoughts and creations.” If we can get past the distraction of de Jong's contemporary use of gendered language, we will hopefully hear a tone resonant with our own vocation's sound. The best of what humanity thinks and creates—can you not think of a better topic of study, a better place to wear out your life in service to others whom you love and whose lives you wish to enrich with your own poignant if
limited discoveries? And Prof. de Jong invites us not just to talk about it, but to act, to live a life informed by that discovery. In many ways this parallels the challenge we face when converted: How do we live up to the compelling implications of a new truth? How do we take what is an infinite and beautiful invitation to relish life’s experiences from a new perspective of light? Of course we fall short, waste our time, stumble through reluctantly sometimes when we should be charging forward, but I believe our salvation is in our momentum and our direction rather than some kind of unsullied purity of progress. My inner science geek likes to compare it to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle and electrons. [SLIDE] I even have coined a phrase for it: quantum assessment. Given the choice to spend all our efforts either trying to measure exactly where we are or analyzing our trajectory and momentum, I’d go for the latter over the former any day. I know this may sound slightly blasphemous in our metrically-skewed culture of assessment, but it is the kind of assessment that matters, because it asks the really important question: Are all our efforts taking us in the right direction?

I have gained a perspective, a conviction, even a testimony, that now is our moment to raise our torches high, to demonstrate living the Gospel in our teaching, research, and service (even our administration!), to provide all those around us with the kind of example of thoughtful, lived faith we have seen in Michelle James delivery of her profound devotional, in Dan Muhlstein’s confronting the Big Questions with his students, and in the loving and faith-filled way Wang ShuPei teaches her students Chinese.

**Conclusion: The gracious words**

When Christ first spoke to the people of Nazareth in the synagogue after his temptation in the wilderness He read from Isaiah 61: [SLIDE] “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, /To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.” After Christ expounded upon the prophecy to which He was the fulfillment, the people wondered or marveled at “the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. And they said, Is not this Joseph’s son?” (Luke 4:22) [SLIDE]

Aside from the irony of their rhetorical question (since Christ was not Joseph’s son, after all, and if they understood that they would have known from whence Christ’s eloquence came), their marvel is justified because we should always marvel at what the Spirit adds to our lowly capacities, especially when we are discussing spiritual matters. Yes, to them Jesus was the carpenter’s son, the boy they had all watched grow up and had seen in the market, playing with the other children from the town,
and so they, like all of us, had a right to a kind of pleasant awe that comes when we see boys and girls from the neighborhood turn into men and women and assume their roles in society. But in this instance the insight, and the audacity, of His interpretation of the prophecy, and its inherent assertion as to His divine identity, challenged them well beyond the usual surprise at a local boy doing well in the world. Things, of course, go downhill from there…

But I want to return to the phrase Luke chose to describe how the people, before they turned sour, characterized Christ’s teachings: “the gracious words.” This echoes the Psalmist’s phrase “grace is poured into thy lips” (Psalm 45:2), and suggests that when we speak through the Spirit our words can be eloquent, beautiful, and full of grace. Christ embodies grace, so it stands to reason that his words would be gracious, but in this early context I think we are given a clue as to how unusual such grace was by his neighbors’ amazed and positive response. “Gracious words” are not what they had expected the local boy to speak with such eloquence and power, but the content of his message also full of grace, the essence of Christ’s merciful mission: giving hope to the poor, healing the brokenhearted, redeeming captives, restoring sight to the blind, and setting free those who have been subjected to violence. These are marvelous, even revolutionary, actions for anyone, at any time, especially in Roman Palestine, and Christ tells the people he grew up with that he has come to accomplish these remarkable, even dangerous, things. They are shocked, and taken off guard, even considering the rumors they have heard about his miracles in Capernaum, and are awestruck both by the way He speaks and also by the implications for mercy and grace that His chosen passage from Isaiah suggest.

Think about times in your life when you have been taken off guard by the powerful content of gracious words—from any source—that give hope, heal, redeem, restore, or liberate. And think about how, at times, those gracious words come from very unexpected sources, some from people least likely to inspire—a peer in graduate school, a small child, someone in a bar, even a character in a bad novel—or, even more surprising, those with whom we are most familiar: your sibling, your child, your spouse, your colleague. Did you see God’s hand in their gracious words? Did it move you, change your life? In Lukes’ story Christ’s word are gracious both because of the way they are spoken—with authority, insight, and conviction—and also because of their message: give hope, heal, redeem, restore, liberate, God is among us now. And grace adds to grace when those words touch and move others to act, to translate and share the feelings they receive through the Spirit of truth.

Don’t be afraid to let the Spirit prompt you in your teaching and in your interaction with others, both in your preparation and also in the very moment. Let the Spirit guide you in your pursuit of
knowledge and truth, both as you study and as you write. Realize that, for our students and our colleagues, we—in spite of all our flaws and familiarities—can be the source of gracious words that move others to see, to learn, to act, and to translate the whispered, soul-deep feelings into a lifetime of giving, and receiving, grace.

This is a labor of love, and His grace is sufficient for us all. I testify of that with all my heart.