The Liberal Arts & Magical Teaching

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The following is a lightly revised transcript of Stephen Smith's address. The editors have made an effort to stay true to the style with which he delivered it on September 7, 2011

It is an honor to give the Walter Gong memorial address. I hope he would be pleased by my remarks. It is fitting to have a faculty conference keynote address named for someone so dedicated to education. I would like to talk today about a very specific sort of education that I will call "liberal arts education". I am an unabashed fan of liberal arts education. I was greatly pleased that my son chose to be an English major here at BYU-Idaho. Along with this discussion of liberal arts, I also want to talk about satanic counterfeits, Max Weber's rationalization and bureaucracy, and magic.

First, a quick review of the liberal arts, and what I mean when I say that. I am referring to the concept of the classical liberal arts of ancient and medieval roots, education that makes people free: the trivium and the quadrivium. We still see the echoes of this ancient model in our contemporary system. The trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric, or the language arts) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy, or the number arts) are still foundational. These key areas still form the basis of the SAT and ACT, which so many universities require for admissions. We want to know about students' foundational aptitude.

The idea of the liberal arts is not just the ability to read, write, and do arithmetic; the idea is to be able to think critically and freely in ways that stretch your mind and awareness. It is the making of worthwhile connections between bits of information, not just being able to regurgitate them. It is old-school education, that of being well-read and having deep thoughts. It is the aligning of your mind with truth. This is the ancient foundation of formal education, so ancient that it goes back to the beginning and starts with questions; an angel asking Adam, "Why dost thou offer sacrifices unto the Lord?" (Moses 3:9), or how about, "[Adam], where art thou?" (Genesis 3:9).

Liberal arts education is about the ordering of thoughts and information in meaningful ways—ways that promote understanding and truth. It is rooted in ancient religious traditions like temples. It is no wonder that temples across time and space and cultures involve so much symbolism and reenactments of creation stories. Creation stories are the ultimate stories of ordering. Our creation story is of the elements of the universe being ordered for a divine purpose. The opposite of order is chaos—the evil nature of the elements. Yet, I think there is a continuum of evil with chaos on one extreme and satanic order on the other. A false ordering can be just as bad as chaos. If Satan cannot keep the elements of the universe in a chaotic state, then the next best thing is to impose an unnatural order to things. To do this he needs a convincing form of order and a counterfeit purpose for that order. We will get to the form of order in a minute.

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First, the counterfeit purpose. I posit that his counterfeit purpose is the "Mahan Principle", which Hugh Nibley (1989) explains "is a frank recognition that the world's economy is based on the exchange of life for property" (p. 436). Cain's application of the principle was the most obvious type: kill Abel and gain his property. I think there is a more subtle form as well: the exchange of time and effort for money. Here we have a great satanic counterfeit for life: the purpose of life is money. A liberal arts education and its ordering principles stand opposed to this new plan because such educational efforts lead to truth and freedom, and the truth is that life is not about money.

Truth, light, and understanding cannot stay hidden from those sincerely and properly seeking them. "Therefore, ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you; for he that asketh, receiveth; and unto him that knocketh, it shall be opened" (3 Nephi 27:29). If this is a true principle, and you are Satan, then how do you fight against it? Giving false answers is not an option—you don't control truth. You have to get people to not ask and not knock. However, here you are blocked by another true principle: The earth was ordered to provide a place for souls to progress, and learning is an inherent part of this. As President Clark (2011) has said, you "were born to learn" (p. 3). So, true to form, Satan does not directly stop education, but twists it into something attractive but empty. He promotes a counterfeit educational process. He is a master of convincing us that the sand we are building

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on is rock, or even better, that we can turn the sand that we are knowingly building on into rock. It just takes a lot of money to do so.

Of course, we have the satanic counterfeits of this educational system in the universities. Hugh Nibley has done an excellent job of delineating this, and I will refer to some of his ideas. I want to get into the practical evolution of what modern education has turned to. As Hugh Nibley (1994) explained, "Worse still, they have chosen business-oriented, career-minded, degree-seeking programs in preference to the strenuous, critical, liberal, mind-stretching exercises that Brigham Young recommended" (p. 338). Here again is the idea of a liberal arts education versus its counterfeit purpose. I won't spend any more time on this false purpose because, again, Hugh Nibley has done an exceptional job of explaining it. I would like to address the form of false ordering now.

When I was asked to give this address, I was lecturing on Max Weber and his ideas of the rationalization of society and bureaucracy. I was struck by how applicable his ideas were to the misuse of education Nibley speaks of. First, let me review some of Weber's ideas. You have to love a professor like Weber, who was something of a hot head and would get into duels—and he liked to show off his dueling scars. I think professors should have some dueling scars—evidence of life outside the ivory tower. My children love my bedtime story of how I rescued their mother from pirates. In the course of the battle a pirate knocked out one of my teeth. So, my gold tooth is a result of me chopping off his ear and melting down his gold earring to make myself a new tooth. The story seems to reassure them of the strength of our relationship because you don't fight pirates for just anyone. The power of dueling scars. Anyway, Weber argued that religion was a

central feature of society, but that it has evolved over time along the lines of disenchantment. An enchanted world is one filled with mystery and magic, and disenchantment is the process of removing these things. An example of this is the secularization of society. As religion becomes separated from social institutions and practices, more secular principles take over. The world becomes a more rational place. It is not the blessings of God or the gods that provide us with good crops, but the proper application of fertilizer, planting at the right time, etc.; things that we have come to by applying the scientific method.

So, what is this magic that the world is losing? Magic is the unknown, the unexplainable; something that you experience as real, but don't understand. Magic is fascinating, mind-boggling; it captures our attention and

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holds our interest. Magic is a very real thing, I believe, and it is opposed to the modern, scientific world. When I was in graduate school, there was a large number of fellow LDS graduate students there, especially in the sciences and engineering. We used to get into these wonderful arguments. If you are not arguing, you are not learning. It is a pretty horrible education if you are only hearing things that you agree with, or that you already know. So, my friends and I would argue about God. They would say that the universe makes rational sense and that God follows natural laws. I would call this blasphemy and state that God is omnipotent and subject to no law outside of Himself. Remember these great times in school arguing about things you would not be graded on? You see, liberal arts education is a natural phenomenon. My friends would argue that the universe could be explained by science, and for the evolutionary nature of those explanations; that what we don't understand yet we will, as evidenced by the history of rational explanations. They felt that God was some sort of superior scientist who simply understood perfectly the laws of nature and so could work so well within them. I would always disagree and argue for magic. I would say that if God simply follows natural laws, and we are always getting a better understanding of them, then will not the time come that we will discover the laws of resurrection and atonement? Why do we need Jesus if all we need is a perfect understanding of natural laws? They would want my explanation, and I could only offer magic. I would tell them I did not know how resurrection and the Atonement work—they're magic. They're fascinating, mind boggling. They're things that I experience as real, but don't understand.

According to Weber, there is a method to this madness of disenchantment, this removal of magic from our lives. At first, people relied on magic to provide meaning and explanation to life. Again, throw a virgin in the volcano and you get good crops; it's magic. However, the social evolution of religion is the change to religious symbolism and professionalism. Life moved from sole reliance on nature to our ability to control nature. Hunting and gathering peoples did not have much control over the migration of game or the growth of grains, but

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horticultural and pastoral peoples can sort seeds, plant and irrigate, and raise animals. This led to division of labor and surpluses, which in turn led to the professional class of priest/teachers. They became the guardians of esoteric knowledge and magical methods. As their worlds became less enchanted, they wanted to maintain control of the spiritual world, and have job security, so they made the magic secret and complex. Not just anyone could address the gods, you had to be properly dressed, say the right things in the right way, etc. Organized religion came about as maintenance of these symbolic complexities, according to Weber.

Education has followed much of this same path. There is something magical in exploring the world, in reading new ideas, arguing, and making connections. It is fascinating and exciting, but we have turned the maintenance of this process over to a professional class of priest/teachers. They/we have become the guardians of the "proper" way to learn with its esoteric methods and focus on the proper procedures. Education is now largely concerned with the maintenance of the symbolic complexities of the process; for example, grades, diplomas, program requirements, etc. What is needed is the orderly maintenance of these symbolic complexities, which leads to rational and objective standards, which takes us right to Weber's ideas on bureaucracy. These can be summarized in the following six points: (1) an explicit division of labor with delineated lines of authority, (2) the presence of a power hierarchy, (3) written rules and communication, (4) accredited training and technical competence, (5) management by rules that is emotionally neutral, and (6) the ownership of both the career ladder and position by the organization, rather than by the individual (Allan, 2006). This is very familiar to us as it describes most large organizations—even BYU-Idaho to some extent.

The presence of a bureaucracy pretty much guarantees the absence of magic, and I see this as a sad thing. Magic has many implications, including the thrill of the unexplained or the unexpected. This summer one of my daughters is learning how to drive. I have always found great joy in driving, and I wish that for her. However, there is not much joy in her driving right now. She is, and correctly so, so focused on the rules and safety that she is not experiencing the thrill of the ride. She is not at the point where she can just jump in and drive away. She is constantly monitoring her speed, making sure she stops completely behind the sign. Driving is more of a systematic

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process than a magical experience for her right now. As the procedures become more second-nature to her, she will begin to experience the magic of driving.

This is much like a bureaucratic form of education. Now this is tricky, because I am going to complain a little about bureaucracies and education, so it will sound a little like a condemnation of BYU-Idaho, and to some degree, I suppose it is. But hear me the right way: I am talking about the potential that bureaucratic forms of government have for limiting true education. The problem is that to maintain the orderly accomplishment of goals–especially as an organization grows–the more developed the bureaucracy is. Remember the six points of a bureaucracy outlined above. These things in an educational institution have the potential of disenchanting teaching and learning. Much like my young daughter, we can be so concerned with missing a check point or going one mile over the speed limit that that becomes our entire focus. We focus on the procedures and process of organized education instead of enjoying the ride of learning. You do not have to violate the procedures to enjoy the ride; it is just a matter of what you are paying attention to. Below I would like to address each of the six points of Weber's bureaucracy as they relate to education.

First, an explicit division of labor with delineated lines of authority. Interestingly enough, this first point is an area that I think is being very well addressed here. The foundations program, with its interdisciplinary focus, helps us to cross these lines and division of labor, at least across disciplines. C. Wright Mills (1959) says that the "one great obstacle to unified work in social science is the one-discipline introductory textbook" (p. 141). One of the most fulfilling and satisfying opportunities of my teaching career has been my involvement with the World Foundations course here on campus. It is such a multi-disciplinary course and a great example of liberal arts education. And, I might add, the association with amazing teachers from across campus has pushed me further in my own education.

Second, the presence of a power hierarchy. This point has a great potential to distract us. When there is a hierarchy and we are steeped in a competitive culture, much like our own, then we become very conscience of our place in the hierarchy and of our means of moving up or not moving up. This can stifle some of the magic because, as one of the most magical teachers of them all says, it limits our ability to "Take chances, make mistakes, get messy." This is Ms. Frizzle from The Magic School Bus, a children's cartoon (Scholastic Studios, 1994–97). I hope you are all familiar with it. They understand this idea of liberal arts education and had no better way of explaining it than making it a magical experience. The problem with a hierarchy is not so much that those above us in the hierarchy take issue with our chances, mistakes, and messes, but that we avoid them altogether because we fear that chances, mistakes, and messes will endanger our social mobility. We know fear is bad, and we know providing a better experience for students is good. I have heard a lot about using case studies for learning opportunities. I am totally unfamiliar with them and frankly a little afraid to try one. I would be taking a chance, I might

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make mistakes, and the whole thing would become a big mess. What if my colleagues, department chair, or dean found out that I had a total failure in the classroom? So, I avoid trying something new. I stick to the old tried and true methods of lecture and quizzes. Horrible, isn't it? Education is no place to be conservative; it should be progressive. New ideas and new methods should be sought after. Not everything will work or should be used again and there is still the proper use and place for the old tried and true methods. But, we should be looking forward in a truly progressive state. The point is that fear should not guide pedagogy, especially fear of not getting to move up the hierarchy.

Third, written rules and communication. Now a word of caution: All this talk about taking chances, making mistakes, and getting messy can lead to an attitude of complete independence and even rebellion. I am not advocating this, for all things should be done in wisdom and order, but it is much like my daughter driving so meticulously that she can't enjoy the trip. The point is to get beyond the rules in the sense that they become second-nature, and not to let them weigh you down and distract you from teaching and learning. They can get in your brain and fester. I have been quite guilty in the past of kicking against the pricks of bureaucratic communication, which detracts from what I should be doing. For instance, in the past I did not enjoy wearing a tie. Several years ago a memo came around stating that I should. I put on a tie and guess what! My lecture notes still work, my class activities are just as useful, and I still enjoy reading.

I have more recently had a very interesting experience with this. A while ago President Clark invited us to do a few things: begin class with a prayer, attend devotional, and dress up for devotional. I took it as a personal challenge to meet this bureaucratic overture with uncharacteristic conformity. I remember talking with President Bednar when I first started here, and he asked if I started class with prayer. I replied, "No, because it was too ...", and he finished with, "Sunday Schoolish." I agreed, and we moved on in the conversation. I also liked to listen to devotional

in my office so I could continue working; sort of serving two masters at the same time. And, I had already started wearing ties, for heaven's sake, what more did these people want? But, I put on a suit and went to devotional, and invited students to pray to begin class. You can explain it how you want, but for me there is something truly magical about hearing a student call down blessings from heaven on you and your class. I think there is something magical about gathering to the BYU-Idaho Center for devotional. And, I just like wearing the suit. Once you move beyond the rules to where they are second-nature and not in the forefront of your mind detracting from more important work, it can be magical.

We can also become too engrossed in our own written rules and communication. I alluded earlier to the Socratic Method of asking questions. I imagine that if Adam had been a product of our contemporary educational system, with its focus on written rules and communication, he would have responded differently to those questions:
"[Adam], where art thou?"
"Hey, you didn't say there would be pop quizzes."
"Why dost thou offer sacrifices?"
"What? I'm supposed to be offering sacrifices? Is that in the syllabus?"
As the focus becomes narrow, so goes the mind.

Fourth, accredited training and technical competence. This aspect of education is quite important. You do need to have the appropriate training and competence, but you need something more as well. You need the heart and soul of an academic. I remember a couple of years ago in the first BYU-Idaho Faculty Conference when John Ivers said something along the lines that we ought to be outrageous. As educators we need not be cheerful robots, but animated, passionate, and inspiring scholars. C. Wright Mills (1959) said that

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our foremost job as professors is to reveal to students how a supposedly self-disciplined mind works. The art of teaching is in considerable part the art of thinking out loud, but intelligibly.

Fifth, management by rules that is emotionally neutral. I will say very little about management, other than to refer you to Nibley's (1983) talk on managers and leaders. Managers may be emotionally neutral, but leaders are full of passion and emotion.

Sixth, the ownership of both the career ladder and position by the organization, rather than by the individual. Herein lies our greatest advantage. We are a university faculty, one of the last places left for total ownership. If we let that go, it is nobody's fault but our own. Fear sometimes motivates the relinquishing of ownership, because with ownership comes responsibility, and it is easier to do what they say than to figure it out for ourselves. Besides, we might make a mistake or a mess. I think historically the artists and poets are the last to surrender ownership. Why is it that so many artists and poets are revolutionaries, or so many revolutionaries are artists and poets?

So, is there help beyond the bureaucracy? I think we all know there is. Have you not been in a magical learning experience some time in your life? I think in a real sense it comes down to ownership and following Ms. Frizzle's advice. If we stop worrying about our position in the bureaucracy and think more about our stewardship and objectives, then magic can happen. I offer an example of a truly magical course: it was a Sunday School class of seventeen-year-olds. This was one of those classes were students only came to make trouble; they were uninterested and prided themselves on scaring away teachers.

The new teacher was given all the warnings. The first day with the new teacher all the kids were there to check out the new victim. He started with the typical lesson that quickly deteriorated into seventeen-year-old silliness. So, the teacher turned to Moroni (6:9) and read about how meetings are to be run by the Spirit, and he asked the students what they wanted to do or talk about during their time together. Their answers were pretty typical of teenagers trying to freak out an adult. The first thing they said was "Sex", then "Drugs", then "Other churches", etc.

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"Fine", said the teacher, "next week I will come prepared to talk about sex, not a lesson on the Law of Chastity, but we will talk about sex." It was his turn to freak them out, but they all showed up the next week, of course. He started off asking, "What is the big deal about sex? Why do they say we have to wait until marriage?" The next week he started with, "I really would like to smoke pot, but I don't. Why not?" Well, an interesting thing happened. He had stolen their questions. These were the outrageous questions that would scare away a teacher, and they could hardly wait to put them in play. But the teacher led with them, and they couldn't think of anything else to do but follow along.

I think there are a couple of important points to make here for why this worked. First, the teacher started out from an outrageous position. He hooked them with, "This is a little crazy; let's see where it goes." And second, these questions were not about dramatic effect, nor were they facetious questions; these are sincere and real questions that seventeen-year-olds have. So, they started talking about them. It began with a lot of complaining and agreement that nothing made sense, but they kept coming back to the questions because they wanted the answers. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to open the scriptures when the discussion led there. The fascinating thing was that by the end of the hour they had a great lesson on the Law of Chastity or the Word of Wisdom. Only, he never preached or gave a list of what to do or not do. They ended up talking about sex and how it fit into the Plan of Salvation, and they made connections that most of us understand but that we so seldom explain to the young. They understood the Word of Wisdom not as a checklist, but as a blessing, and they saw how it connected bodies and spirits and was just a strand in the web of the Gospel. Plus, it was a blast—fascinating and exciting. They could start with some outrageous question, such as, "Why are Catholic churches so much cooler than ours?", and end up with a great discussion of symbolism, apostasy, and restoration. After a few weeks, parents would come up to the teacher and ask what he was doing, because their children were not only attending Sunday School, but wanted to go and were discussing the Gospel with them. He would just tell them that they talk about sex, drugs, and rock and roll. They would look at him funny and with a nervous laugh tell him to keep it up.

In this magical class much of the bureaucratic ethos were violated. The teacher took a chance conducting the class in such a manner that it had great potential to be a mistake and make a mess. It probably blew his chances of climbing the hierarchy; it didn't follow the written rules, and he had no specialized training, but was flying by the seat of his pants not knowing beforehand the things that he should do (1 Nephi 4:6). Class was not emotionally neutral; it was full of emotion, tears, and passionate discussion. The learners took responsibility for the class, for better or worse. In the end, the teacher wasn't telling them anything they didn't already know, he was just helping them make connections–helping to align their minds with truth.

These young people in the church are ready to learn; they yearn for it. All they need is the proper environment, an enchanted environment. Remember, "they were born to learn" (Clark, 2011, p. 3). We were born to learn, not to be preached to, not to be given a list to repeat back on demand, not to be presented with hoops of symbolic complexity to jump through; to learn. And, there is something magical when we learn. Elder Bednar (2006) explains learning by faith and how the Spirit is the teacher. But, how does that work? I don't know—it's magic. I suspect it has something to do with asking questions, and I think the bureaucratic ethos has dampened our enthusiasm for questions. It is almost like we are afraid

of the answers. I have shared this Sunday School story before and the most common response is, "Don't you think it is a little dangerous to ask those questions? What if it didn't turn out well?" My response is always the same: "You gather a bunch of people that have the gift of the Holy Ghost, you begin the discussion with a prayer inviting the Spirit to join you, and you ask a sincere question, no matter how outrageous it may be. How can that not end any other way but well? Do you really think that somehow they would get to, 'Yep, turns out we can smoke pot'?"

Another way of stimulating magic is to express the passion and enthusiasm you feel for your subject matter. If you are teaching and do not feel passion for your subject, discipline, scholarship, etc., if you have no enthusiasm for what you do, then why are you here? For the money? I would like to give you an example of the magic of enthusiastic teaching. I was talking with a student recently, and to paraphrase the conversation, he complained about having to take foundations courses. Again, they don't have anything to do with his career or his money-making potential. Later in the conversation he mentioned how he had seen his science foundation teacher walking in my neighborhood. I asked who it was and he replied, "Brother Kevin Kelly", and proceeded to tell me how much he liked him. I pointed out that he was referring to one of the foundations courses that he had just been disparaging. He quickly backtracked with, "No, no, his class was awesome. He is a great teacher." "What makes him great?" I asked. The reply: "He was kind of nerdy about science, but the kind of nerdy where he is so passionate about his subject that you can't help but to get drawn in and excited about it as well. I really enjoyed the class."

Passion, enthusiasm, and really great questions are the key. And if you are no longer passionate about your discipline, may I suggest you try becoming a student of it again. One of the things that Brother Walter Gong gave the world is the idea that teachers need to be learners and learners need to be teachers. So, if you have lost that loving feeling, take advantage of some leave opportunities, reread the foundational text of your discipline, study some new aspect of it, and go get into arguments about it. I wonder if that would be a viable leave option: "I am going to go argue for the semester." How cool would that be to have an argument table in the Crossroads? You get a three-credit leave to go sit at the table for an hour every day and explore outrageous ideas with people that think differently

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than you. It could be a good way to pick up some dueling scars as well. Don't forget the value of magical stories about dueling scars. My children know I love their mother; I fought pirates for her and I have the golden tooth to prove it. That demonstrates great passion to a 4 year-old. What demonstrates great passion to a college student?

The problem is that if you ask an outrageous question and passionately seek answers, you never know where you might end up. Now we have come full circle. The professional priest/teacher class made sure that we stayed away from questions and from allowing the Spirit to teach because it was too messy and sometimes mistakes were made. It is much easier to create a lot of ritual and symbolic complexity to drown out learning. Keep them busy with more important things than the "strenuous, critical, liberal, mind-stretching" education that Brigham Young suggested. And what is more important than making money? You get the Spirit involved and you never know where you might end up. It could be outside the norm; you might become peculiar. You might even end up a poor but free thinker. I bet that the question, "What kind of job can you get with that major?" is much more popular around Thanksgiving dinner tables than, "What kind of interesting stuff are you learning in that major?"
I want to give the complete quote from Hugh Nibley (1994) that I have referenced before:

> Brigham was right after all. As administrative problems have accumulated in a growing Church, the authorities have tended to delegate the business of learning to others, and those others have been only too glad to settle for the outward show, the easy and flattering forms, trappings, and ceremonies of education. Worse still, they have chosen business-oriented, career-minded, degree-seeking programs in preference to the strenuous, critical, liberal, mind-stretching exercises that Brigham Young recommended. We have chosen the services of the hired image-maker in preference to unsparing self-criticism, and the first question the student is taught to ask today is John Dewey's golden question: "What is there in it for me?" (p. 338)

So, where does all of this leave us? The reality is that some degree of large organization is necessary. We need to have program objectives and assessments, we need some admission requirements and gatekeepers, etc. So, how do we have magical courses, how do we take the focus off of money, and how do we live in the bureaucracy but not be of the bureaucracy? I advocate getting on the Magic School Bus: "Take chances, make mistakes, get messy." And, I would add a couple more things: Express your passion for your topics and ask outrageous questions.

Remember the outrageous questions may not be where you want to end up, but they get you started. For example, in Economics: "Why is communism the better system?" In Biology: "Can we design a better eye than God?" In Political Science: "How do you get a true Democrat elected in Rexburg?" In Physics: "How strong was Atlas? And what was he standing on?" In Theater: "Can we fake the Mars landings?" In University Studies: "What if the Hokey Pokey really is what it's all about?" Again, take chances, make mistakes, get messy, express your passion for your topics, and ask outrageous questions. Keep the magic alive.

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