

“On Learning in Wartime”

Remarks originally given at LDS Business College

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In the fall of 1939, Europe was on the eve of war. Nazi Germany had begun its ascent, and millions of citizens were paralyzed with the fear of the pending crisis. In this highly charged setting, a new semester was about to begin all across England, and many wondered whether returning to school even made sense given so much uncertainty. On the campus of Oxford University, theologian C.S. Lewis noted the ambiguity, declaring: “As students, you will be expected to make yourselves ... into philosophers, scientists, scholars, critics, or historians. And at first sight this seems to be an odd thing to do during a great war.”¹

In my message today, I wish to explore the question of why we should persist in our studies, even in the face of such external crises, such as war or, in our case, a global pandemic. I will draw heavily on the sermon given by C.S. Lewis entitled “Learning in War-Time.” The answer Lewis shared with his students (and which I will share here with you today) is two-fold:

- First, he reminded his students that the crisis they faced, despite its current scale and ferocity, would in some sense, always be with them. In other words, he reminded his students that a crisis of some form would perpetually threaten their personal growth and academic pursuits. Indeed, there would always be a rationalization to put off schooling.
- Second, Lewis also awakened his audience to the fact that far beyond the conflict with Nazi Germany lay a much more permanent war between good and evil. The question of learning in wartime is a more fundamental question for all Christians, who must decide whether to spend time educating their minds and developing their professional interests, even when they are so desperately needed in the battle for salvation.

Today I will explore each of these topics as they impact our students both here at LDS Business College and all across the Church Educational System. I will explore these questions in the context of our current global pandemic, but perhaps more permanently, in our efforts in the war between good and evil and the call to build up the kingdom of God in the last days.

Learning in a Crisis

Let’s start with the question of learning in a crisis. Today we are facing the crisis of a global pandemic. For C.S. Lewis and his students at Oxford, that crisis was the Second World War. I love this visual of St. Paul’s Cathedral standing as a beacon throughout the crisis and, particularly, in the face of the air raids during the Battle of Britain. The cathedral, like so many of you, stands with courage in the face of adversity. But despite the visibility of a physical war or the scale of a global pandemic, C.S. Lewis reminds us that those crises, in many ways, are nothing new in the lives of individual students: “I think it important to try to see the present calamity in a true perspective, The war [and I would add, the pandemic] creates no absolutely new situation: it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice.... We are mistaken when we compare war with ‘normal life.’ Life has never been normal. Even those periods which

¹ C.S. Lewis, “Learning in War-Time,” (Sermon at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, Autumn, 1939)

we think most tranquil ... turn out, on closer inspection, to be full of cries, alarms, difficulties, emergencies. Plausible reasons have never been lacking for putting off [learning].”²

If you think about your own life challenges as a student at LDS Business College, you know this is true. Our students at BYU-Pathway also face similar difficulties. Each of you are facing or will face crises and challenges that feel individualized and personal to you. For some, these crises might be financial — either in finding the ongoing resources to pay for school or those that arise in a short-term hardship. Other students face a crisis of confidence — you wonder whether you are equipped for the rigors of college and whether you have the capacity to finish your degree. Family challenges might also keep some of you from progressing the way you had hoped. And for others still, there are issues tied to anxiety, depression, physical challenges, and so many other crises you manage. They may not be as visible as the current pandemic or Europe’s historic wars, but that doesn’t make them any less challenging and real to you personally. There will always be a reason why you think now is not the time to continue your studies. Again, as C.S. Lewis described, your life will always be full of “cries, alarms, difficulties, [and] emergencies.”

Of course, we know education is important. In the words of President Gordon B. Hinckley, “You must get all of the education that you possibly can. Life has become so complex and competitive.... You will be expected to put forth great effort and to use your best talents to make your way. ...[S]acrifice anything that is needed to be sacrificed to qualify yourselves.”³ President Hinkley believed in you when he said: “You have the potential to become anything to which you set your mind.”⁴ And that includes overcoming the crises in your lives. By fighting through the challenges of this current crisis, you are learning something that will help you face future challenges throughout the rest of your life. Keep learning. Trust in the Lord, and you will be blessed with abilities you did not know you had.

Learning for the Kingdom

I’d next like to address why your learning matters so much to the kingdom of God. To do this, I will draw your attention to the larger crisis facing all believers — the battle between good and evil. This battle began in the Grand Council in Heaven. And this battle will continue long after the present crises of the world have passed. It is in that light that our decision about formal education must truly be weighed. Again, in C.S. Lewis’s sermon on “Learning in War-Time,” he points out that, as followers of Christ, we have always been enlisted in a struggle for the souls of men: “[E]very Christian who comes to a university must at all times face a question compared with which the questions raised by the war are relatively unimportant. He must ask himself how it is right, or even psychologically possible, for creatures who are every moment advancing either to heaven or to hell, to spend any fraction of the little time allowed them in this world on such comparative trivialities as literature or art, mathematics or biology.”⁵ Indeed, we are asking you to develop job skills in areas from applied business, to technology, to digital communications. If this world is our chance to prepare to meet God and we should all be enlisted in building His kingdom, why do we spend so much time on professional skill development?

Part of that answer lies in the fact that you will be a better resource to the kingdom as you are more able to provide for a family and secure your temporal self-reliance, both now and in the future. Part of the reason why you should pursue your education is that it will also make you more effective in your future families and in your service to the kingdom. The mission statement of LDSBC encourages you to become capable disciples. The mission statement of BYU-Pathway similarly encourages students to become disciples who can be leaders in their homes, the Church, and their communities. President Nelson has said: “In the Church, obtaining an education and getting

² Ibid

³ Gordon B. Hinckley, “[Seek Learning](#),” *New Era*, Sept. 2007

⁴ Gordon B. Hinckley, “[Stay on the High Road](#),” *Ensign or Liahona*, Apr. 2004

⁵ C.S. Lewis, “Learning in War-Time,” (Sermon at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, Autumn, 1939)

knowledge are a religious responsibility. We educate our minds so that one day we can render service of worth to somebody else."⁶ You are preparing not just for a future career, but you are preparing so you can have a greater impact on the kingdom of God. That starts with becoming spiritually and temporally self-reliant. But if you really understand the deeper purposes of your education, you will see that the Lord is preparing you for service in your home and in the Church that will help save and lift those around you. In this sense, I invite you to consecrate your learning to God. Again, as C.S. Lewis described, "All of our merely natural activities will be accepted, if they are offered to God, even the humblest: and all of them, even the noblest, will be sinful if they are not."⁷ In these times of commotion, if you will offer your studies as an offering to the Lord for His righteous purposes, His power will descend upon you in great glory and you will be protected and strengthened in the most remarkable ways.⁸

So, as we work together to push through this current global crisis, I hope we can draw on C.S. Lewis's lesson of learning in wartime. May we remember that there will always be challenges and crises in our lives. And there will always be rationalizations to give up and lose hope for our education. But you are learning from the present crisis the very attributes of persistence and grit that will bless you throughout your entire life. Moreover, if you consecrate your studies to the Lord, recognizing how you can use your learning to build His kingdom, He will pour out power and capacity that you never thought you had.

I testify that you are about a sacred work. Your education is key to your personal growth and to realizing your potential in the Lord. He will bless you. He will elevate you in your righteous efforts. Lean into Him. Feel His mercy, understanding, and power. Keep learning in faith. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

⁶ Russell M. Nelson, "[Focus on Values](#)," *Liahona*, Feb. 2013

⁷ C.S. Lewis, "Learning in War-Time," (Sermon at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, Autumn, 1939)

⁸ See also [1 Nephi 14:14](#)