



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title On Becoming a Disciple-Scholar

Author(s) President Cecil O. Samuelson

Reference *FARMS Review* 20/2 (2008): 1-14.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract President Samuelson's Neal A. Maxwell Lecture, delivered 23 March 2007, highlights the life and scholarship of Elder Neal A. Maxwell, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the man for whom the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship was named.

ON BECOMING A DISCIPLE-SCHOLAR

President Cecil O. Samuelson

It is a great privilege to be invited to give this message. There are legions more qualified than am I to address virtually any area of interest to the Institute. The one possible exception is that I believe none of Elder Maxwell's "people projects," of which I was one, love or appreciate him any more than I do.

If Elder Maxwell were physically with us tonight, he would likely be somewhat uncomfortable with what I will say on at least two grounds: The first is that I plan to speak directly about him and lessons learned from him delivered by both precept and example. As we all know, he was a master at deflecting attention from himself, and tonight I leave him no way to defend himself or redirect our praise and admiration elsewhere, as would be his reflexive behavior.

Second, my comments are not intended to be particularly scholarly, nor will they be necessarily broadly enlightening. They have to do with things learned by an audience of one that others might have already understood or mastered without his influence. Nevertheless, I am determined to move ahead with the hope that others, both with us now and those to follow, will always feel an obligation to know something about the man Neal Maxwell personally as well as about his

Neal A. Maxwell Lecture, 23 March 2007, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. This annual lecture is sponsored by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. President Samuelson is president of BYU and a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

remarkable intellect and intellectual curiosity, his exemplary discipleship, and his wide-ranging leadership roles in the Kingdom.

We have Elder Bruce Hafen's impressive biography and also Elder Maxwell's stunning, extensive, and comprehensive written contributions. What we won't have, particularly after some of us who have known him personally have moved on ourselves, will be the firsthand memories and experiences that so enrich our lives. It seems to me to be an almost sacred duty to find ways to transmit to future generations of students and scholars the "touch and feel" of the man Neal Maxwell in addition to his own incomparable scholarly and spiritual contributions which are part of the public record.

As I begin, let me explain that for many years I felt I knew Elder Maxwell before he really knew me. I became aware of the Maxwell family when I was about ten years of age. When our stake boundaries were adjusted, my parents' family, living in the same home, moved from the East Millcreek Stake, where President Gordon B. Hinckley was serving in the stake presidency, to the Grant Stake, where the Maxwell family resided, though in a different ward. My mother was called to work with Sister Emma Maxwell, Elder Maxwell's mother, in the stake Primary. I also went from grade school through high school with his sister Susan and knew others of his sisters as well.

It was probably while I was a student at Granite High School that I first became aware that Neal Maxwell was already considered a distinguished graduate of that institution. By then, he had begun his career as a member of the administration and faculty at the University of Utah.

It was not long after that I began to keep an eye on Brother Maxwell, although we did not have a personal relationship until about two decades later. As a premedical student at the "U," I had no classes from him and avoided trouble sufficiently that I did not have direct interactions with the Dean of Students. Many of my friends knew him personally at that time, and he was greatly admired as a superb teacher, an aggressive basketball player with very sharp elbows, and a true friend to many students.

Over the next few years, I continued to admire him from afar with his appearances on KUED, his bigger-than-life reputation among my

associates, and with a particularly impressive talk he gave at a training meeting for the leaders of the University of Utah student stakes in about 1968. At that time I was serving as an elders quorum president and trying to deal with the pressures of medical school, family, and church at the same time. I can't tell you much of what he said, but it did make me feel generally comforted and encouraged to do better in all that was expected of me. For the reasons I mentioned initially, I felt a personal connection to him even though we had no direct interaction.

In 1970, Elder Maxwell left the University of Utah for the last time at roughly the same time I left for the first time. I was aware of his call as Church Commissioner of Education because even then I sensed the utter amazement and disappointment of many at his leaving the "U" when he clearly was so influential. My father, who was a member of the faculty and acquainted with Brother Maxwell, commented that few of his colleagues could appreciate how persuasive Harold B. Lee could be. Although I do not have firsthand information to support what I will now say, I am convinced that most of our BYU community of that day fully understood Neal Maxwell's "offer" to become the commissioner and were thrilled that the University of Utah's loss was BYU's and the Church's gain. For those with "eyes to see" and "ears to hear," this was a great lesson in obedience and submissiveness. Interestingly to me, while Elder Maxwell taught and wrote extensively about these principles, I never once heard him use himself as an example, although a great example he was.

By 1974, shortly after his call as a General Authority, I had returned to the University of Utah Medical School as a faculty member and attending physician. He had apparently come to the hospital to give someone a blessing, and I was coming out of the room of one of my patients. I knew who he was and so introduced myself and congratulated him on his calling. He did not know me, but was very gracious and thoughtful, even though he must have been in a hurry.

We had no further personal contact for perhaps two or three years. By then, I was serving in the leadership of the Salt Lake University First Stake, and he responded positively to invitations to speak at various

leadership meetings, firesides, and any other occasions that we could contrive to bring him to the campus and to our stake. He was always unfailingly kind, gracious, thoughtful, and helpful. To merely publicize that he was coming was also to ensure that a large crowd would be in attendance.

During the 1980s, I began to have occasions to be with Elder Maxwell with increasing frequency in a number of ways. I'll mention just a few.

By 1982, he was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. I had been released as a stake president and called as a regional representative. In that responsibility, I was assigned to accompany him on two or three stake conference assignments. He was always warm, friendly, and asked very thought-provoking "find out" questions. He was clearly interested in me personally and was a great teacher, although almost always by example and obliquely rather than with direct instruction.

Over the years, I have had the privilege of being with several of the Twelve and First Presidency in stake reorganization assignments and subsequently have been senior on quite a few myself. I have never seen anyone able to interview priesthood leaders with the skill and polish of Elder Maxwell. Even with thirty or more short interviews in succession, the questions were always tailored to the man and intended to teach and lift, all the while obtaining the necessary information. Likewise, in setting apart stake presidencies, mission presidents and their wives, and other important officers, I am a repetitive witness that each blessing and every bit of counsel was "customized" to the needs of the recipient.

Elder Maxwell's influence was not restricted to formal or assigned interactions. On several occasions during those very busy 1980s, he would invite me to join him and some other friends in his office for a sack lunch and discussion. There I sat at his feet with people like Jim Jardine, Drew Peterson, Joe Cannon, Bud Scruggs, Bruce Hafen, his son Cory, and others from time to time. I always came prepared to listen, but that was never the format. He usually began by asking a question of the group, typically being careful to include everyone during the course of the conversation. The question might be, "What topic

are you currently studying in the scriptures?” or “How do you find studying the scriptures to be most effective?” or “What do you feel will be the greatest opportunities or challenges the Church will face in the next twenty years?” As this audience could imagine, we often ventured off into politics, although he almost never incited that drift. We just knew, whatever the issue or event, he would have insightful things to say.

I noted quickly that he did not preach about studying the scriptures. He just assumed that we did and with regularity and intensity. He wasn't directive regarding our responsibility to think and ponder about the future of the Kingdom, but it was clear that to him this is expected of all of us. I also noted his almost automatic ability to turn a “dumb” answer into a profound insight as if I or one of the others had really made the observation ourselves.

In the late 1980s, I was serving on the Missionary Health Advisory Committee, which had been created and charged to do what we could to enhance the health of our missionaries. Initially, our small committee made trips around the world, although we all lived on the Wasatch Front, near Church headquarters. The Brethren then determined that there was some advantage in having the same physician become more familiar with a particular part of the world to provide continuity in advice and counsel. This was before our current practice of calling physicians and their companions to serve full-time missions as health advisors in the missions or Areas of the Church.

I was assigned to the Areas in Asia and the Pacific and spent a couple of weeks, two or three times a year, visiting the many missions in that part of the world. At the same time, Elder Maxwell was also the First Contact in the Twelve, and he graciously invited me to accompany him and Sister Maxwell to various mission presidents' seminars held in Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, and the Philippines. As we traveled together, we not only became better acquainted, but I also had the special privilege of hearing him teach at each stop. Because his mind moved so much faster than mine did, I felt I had finally grasped much of what he was trying to teach by the fourth time he covered a particular topic.

On one trip, he was having some serious back pain, as he did on occasion. No one would have known it, except for the special cushion he had to give him a little comfort as he patiently sat through many meetings and long airplane rides. It was on one of those airplane trips between Tokyo and Manila that I herniated a disc in my own lower back by unwisely jumping up and twisting as I tried to help a little lady retrieve her baggage from the overhead compartment. Given my medical background, I knew exactly what I had done. I tried as best I could to disguise my limp and my pain, but Elder Maxwell noticed it and was especially solicitous.

In one of the meetings the next day, I thought I had masked my discomfort well when Elder Maxwell removed the cushion from his own back and handed it to me with the statement, “You need this more than I do.” On that occasion, he would not take “no” for an answer and made it clear that it was not a matter open for discussion.

One summer day, after several of these trips, he called and asked if I could stop by his office. At that time, my office was located in the Beneficial Life Tower across South Temple from the Church Administration Building, and I was able to go immediately. He was his typical, gracious self and asked if I would be available for the round of mission presidents’ seminars in the fall. I agreed that I could be if he wished. He then said, “I think it would also be nice if Sharon could accompany us if she can.” I told him I was sure we could arrange it. This request came as somewhat of a surprise because such an invitation was certainly not the usual course of things for our committee members. He told me that I shouldn’t say anything about it to the Missionary Department and that he would arrange airline tickets, hotels, and so forth.

Sharon and I had a wonderful time with Colleen and Elder Maxwell. They were unfailingly kind and thoughtful throughout the trip. I’ll give one example. The evening before we were to leave, Sharon and I were out for part of the evening. When we returned home, our children were excited and asked us, “Guess who visited us?” After mentioning our neighbors, their grandparents and other relatives, the bishop, the home teachers, and others that we could think of, they

took great delight in stumping us. They then showed us a beautiful fruit basket with a note from Elder and Sister Maxwell thanking our children for sharing their parents with them for the next several days. These are people who never were too busy to be thoughtful, generous, and uplifting.

The fact that Sharon was going on the trip, which was technically out of policy, became known to some of the staff leadership in the Missionary Department, and they were quite put out at “my” audacious request of a member of the Twelve. I asked Elder Maxwell what I should say, and he said, “Say nothing. I will handle it.” To this day, I do not know what he said or did, but I received no more criticism, at least to my face.

Several years later, after I had been a General Authority for some time, Elder Maxwell made a passing comment about “Sharon’s audition trip.” I was puzzled and asked him to explain. He said that several of the Brethren knew me well but none, other than Elder Ashton, felt that they knew Sharon as well as they would like to. The trip gave him an opportunity to size her up for himself. Since then, Sharon and I have kidded each other on occasion about how our lives would have been very different if she had ordered wine with her meals or told a few questionable jokes when Elder Maxwell invited her to speak.

In my experience, Elder Maxwell was always perfect in following the “unwritten order” of the Church and was ever proper with even the smallest acts of courtesy and deportment. It was interesting to see how he handled the occasional goofs of new Seventies who might come to a meeting and inadvertently sit in the chair of one of the senior Brethren. No one was ever embarrassed, but proper deference was always taught and modeled.

Likewise, while he always announced himself as “Neal” on the telephone to secretaries, his protégés, and others, he was unfailing in the respect he showed to everyone, but especially the senior Brethren. For example, he always called President Faust “President” even though they had been dear friends and associates for years—long before either became a General Authority.

Many of Elder Maxwell's classic and famous "one liners" have been wonderfully recorded in Cory's quote book. Some of his private comments in small, confidential groups were also classics. Pity that they can't be shared widely. That is not because they were not true or tasteful, because they always were. It is accurate to say that they were usually memorable even when not repeatable because without proper context or deep understanding, some of the one-liners would still be humorous but would not teach the intended lesson and might imply criticism or disrespect that did not exist.

I don't believe I ever saw Elder Maxwell duck or evade a question placed before him, but he was also very quick to say, "I don't know." More than once, I can recall him deflecting the frustration or implied criticism of one who didn't agree with a decision made or a path followed by saying something like, "I wonder what the First Presidency or stake presidency knows that we don't know?" I know of no one else who could teach such profound lessons by merely asking seemingly simple and straightforward questions. He sought not only to defuse uncomfortable situations but also to share insight without preaching or condemnation even when such was more than justified.

Over the years, Elder Maxwell's interests and concerns seemed to shift on matters of potentially lesser importance. I have thought about this with great interest and reflection since my arrival at BYU and have seen my own concerns and attitudes develop or change in ways I would never have imagined. In the late 1980s, I became the Vice President for Health Sciences at the University of Utah. While I still spent most of my time up on the hill at the Medical Center, I also had an office in the Park Building, or the University of Utah equivalent to our ASB. It was then I learned that the office I occupied was the same one used by Neal Maxwell when he was Executive Vice President.

Among my many duties was the responsibility to make presentations from time to time to the state legislature. On one occasion, I was assigned to make the case that our appropriation should be larger than was budgeted because of the economic multipliers our research and other activities brought to the state. Wanting to do a good job, I attempted to study the history of these regular struggles between

the university and the legislature. In so doing, I learned that the first and best presentation on that issue to that time had been orchestrated and delivered by Neal Maxwell during Jim Fletcher's administration. Consequently, I based my approach and arguments on what he had done and had some modest but definite success in the process.

I confess that I was quite pleased with this outcome and reported it to Elder Maxwell when I next saw him. To my surprise, he seemed almost disinterested, although he was his usual warm and thoughtful self. He offered his commendation and congratulations, but I realized then that he had really moved on and his mind was focused on bigger and more significant issues. I had heard him talk about the hierarchy of truths previously and how not all of them were created to be equal. Likewise, he taught me that not all honorable activities and endeavors have equal significance for those who really aspire to putting the Kingdom first.

I'm still trying to learn to apply that lesson as I find myself frequently dealing with matters that seem to have great proximal significance and yet virtually no importance in the real big picture. He not only spoke and wrote frequently about the importance of listening to the Spirit to know "things as they really are, and of things as they really will be" (Jacob 4:13), but Neal Maxwell also taught this principle by his own example.

During roughly the same time period, I encountered a dilemma in my professional life that seemed very significant and without easy answers. I understood my alternatives, but each had seemingly major positives and negatives. Because I had received some pointed, unsolicited counsel from President Marion G. Romney some years before that potentially impacted the decision I needed to make, I thought it wise to seek some further and timely counsel from Brother Maxwell and another member of the Twelve. Not wanting to appear to shop for opinions among the Brethren, but knowing that these two apostles would have insights both general and specific, I asked to see them together, and they graciously agreed to visit with me.

As I outlined what I thought my dilemma was, they both listened carefully. The first member of the Twelve asked very insightful

questions and then offered some wise counsel. All through the initial several minutes of our meeting, Elder Maxwell was silent. After his colleague had finished, I turned to him and expected his usual, profound solution to my problem. For what seemed to be a long interval, he said nothing until finally, with some feeling, he said, "Above all else, you must protect your integrity." That was all. I waited for more, but he pushed back his chair and we all stood and the meeting was over. He was gracious and thoughtful as always, but I frankly left a little disappointed.

It was only in the hours and days following the meeting that it came to me with significant clarity that Elder Maxwell had done me a great favor. He was not willing to take away my moral agency even though at the time I would have gladly surrendered it to him. Further, by giving me the direct and clear counsel to protect my integrity, my course of action became crystal clear. The vexing complications I had spent so much time worrying about became secondary details that were more easily dealt with when I realized what was really important.

While I have never been quick enough to catch all that Elder Maxwell taught, in retrospect his seemingly incidental commentary was always instructive. Just two brief examples.

Once, as a member of the Church Public Affairs Committee, I had been asked to handle a slightly complicated and potentially tender situation. I did my best, but in making my report, I expressed my concern that I could have handled the matter better in some respects while confessing that I didn't know what more I could have done. Elder Maxwell simply said, "I think you did just what President Tanner would have done." That was a high compliment. It reminded me yet again that President Tanner was courageous and reeked with integrity, and we have a responsibility to go and do likewise. Elder Maxwell's simple sentence conveyed more meaning important to me than would have a long series of adulatory, but nonspecific, comments of praise.

Just over four years ago, when I had not yet been informed by President Hinckley of my BYU appointment, I was having a bowl of soup with Elder Maxwell. We visited informally about a number of items when seemingly out of the blue, he said to me, "You handle

stress well, don't you." It wasn't a question; it was a statement. I replied that I hoped so. I waited for more light to be shed, but he quickly changed the subject. It was only a few days later and after a brief stop in President Hinckley's office that I thought I then understood what he was driving at.

After these many years, I had learned clearly that Elder Maxwell was always ultracareful never to betray a confidence or speak about confidential matters inappropriately. He was especially punctilious about never getting ahead of the First Presidency in any way on any matter. Nevertheless, knowing President Hinckley's style and his confidence in Elder Maxwell's judgment, I am confident without any affirmative data that he had his role in my current assignment.

My appointment to come to BYU in 2003 came as a complete surprise, but in retrospect I could have seen Elder Maxwell's fingerprints on my career for a long time. Not that I assign to him the blame for what has been inflicted on BYU, but I do recognize his efforts to advance my career and broaden my experiences. Let me share just one among many opportunities that I have been given where I believe him to be in complicity.

In the spring of 1989, BYU President Jeffrey R. Holland was called to the Seventy and an announcement was made of his pending release from BYU. Several weeks after general conference, I was in St. George with my family at a medical meeting. On Friday afternoon, my then sixteen-year-old son, Scott, reported that he had taken a phone message from a "Commissioner Cameron" who wanted me to return his call. I didn't recognize the name initially and asked Scott who he was. He said he didn't know, and I immediately began to search my memory for various county commissioners, legislators, and other public officials. I drew a blank. He then handed me the note with the return phone number, and I saw that it had the 240 prefix, which, as you know, is for Church headquarters.

I returned the call and realized I was speaking with Elliot Cameron, then Commissioner of Church Education. He quickly said, "The search committee for the next president of BYU has asked that you meet with them Monday morning at 9:00 AM in Elder Marvin J. Ashton's office.

May I tell them you will be there?" I said yes and arranged my affairs to do so.

I had also been close to Elder Ashton in both Church assignments and while he served on the Utah State Board of Regents. I had no illusions that I was a serious candidate and assumed that they might want my impressions on other candidates that I might know in higher education circles.

When I arrived, seated next to Elder Ashton behind his desk were Elder Maxwell on his right and Elder L. Tom Perry on his left. They were gracious and friendly. Elder Ashton said, "Both Neal and I know you well. We will have Elder Perry ask you some questions." The first question from Elder Perry was, "How do you think you would fit at BYU?" It was not a question I anticipated, and my answer was, I'm sure, unsatisfactory. Elder Ashton was trying to hide his grin, and Elder Maxwell, keeping his face impassive, just winked at me. I said in response to Elder Perry, "I don't know how I would fit because I have never been a student or faculty member at BYU. I don't think they do what I do, and I don't do what they do." It only occurred to me some-time later to hope they understood clearly that I was talking about my professional activities in medicine and not my personal values or religious practices.

Quickly the conversation moved from my own situation to a discussion of others. Soon the questions became more pointed because I was somewhat acquainted with Rex Lee and they were very interested in any thoughts I had about him, his academic reputation, and suitability for the job. Unfortunately, I couldn't add to anything they did not know, but I left the interview with the distinct impression that Rex Lee was the man, and it was confirmed a few days later with the public announcement. I have often thought that perhaps my very undistinguished performance with the search committee saved me from an interview for my current responsibilities. We don't have time to share other substantive efforts on Elder Maxwell's part to help me, along with countless others, have opportunities and experiences of significance.

Let me conclude with one last experience that I have selected from so many because I believe it is absolutely germane to what must be accomplished at the Maxwell Institute here at BYU. Although Elder Maxwell was weakening in the spring of 2004, he approached his illness and work with admirable clinical detachment and obviously was enduring well to the end. In spite of his pain, weakness, and fatigue, his mind was always on others. By then, I had been at BYU almost one year. One day at the Church Office Building, I ran into Elder Maxwell and he invited me into his office. He was most solicitous and anxious to know how I felt things at BYU were going. He then asked if there was anything he could do to be helpful, all the while strictly respecting my reporting lines to the Board of Trustees.

Knowing his love for BYU and particularly for its important place in the work of the Kingdom, I ventured an invitation to have him come, if he felt able, and speak to our President's Leadership Council at its annual meeting in the weeks ahead. He seemed genuinely pleased with the invitation and, in fact, was able to come. He did a splendid job, as always, and this turned out to be his last mortal visit to BYU.

Both publicly and privately he remarked that day on the tremendous progress made at BYU in the over three decades since he was named as Commissioner of Church Education. He paid especial tribute to the increased quality of the faculty and expressed appreciation for what has been accomplished and anticipation for what yet will be done. He titled his remarks that day "Blending Research and Revelation." Let me share a few paragraphs from his message to the BYU President's Leadership Council.

In a way LDS scholars at BYU and elsewhere are a little bit like the builders of the temple in Nauvoo, who worked with a trowel in one hand and a musket in the other. Today scholars building the temple of learning must also pause on occasion to defend the Kingdom. I personally think [said Elder Maxwell] this is one of the reasons the Lord established and maintains this University. The dual role of builder and defender is unique and ongoing. I am grateful we have scholars today who can handle, as it were, both trowels and muskets.

Our scholars' work must be respectable, and it must be effective over the long haul. In the revelations it is clear that the Lord is concerned about the "rising generations." So whatever is done today in the Church is done in goodly measure for those who will follow. The rising generation needs to be, in the words of Peter and Paul, "grounded," "rooted," "established," and "settled." BYU and its scholars have a role to play in this effort. Of course testimonies are a gift of the Spirit, but the youth of the Church are blessed by what happens here.

Elder Maxwell continues:

I've thought several times in recent years: Who would have ventured to say 30 years ago that BYU would become a focal point for work on the Dead Sea Scrolls? And who would have guessed 30 years ago that we would have a key role with regard to certain Islamic translations? Who would have foreseen the extensive work we do on ancient texts?

I do not think anybody would have guessed that all that is happening would happen so quickly and so demonstrably. The Lord's hand is in it. I do not presume to know in all its dimensions or implications, but it is not accidental.

This description of what has happened during the last three decades not only focuses in large part on what those who are part of the Maxwell Institute, not existing during Elder Maxwell's lifetime in its present form, have accomplished. More importantly, it articulates what must yet be done if we are to meet his challenge to be both builders and defenders. The magnificent charge to those privileged to serve in and with the Maxwell Institute is to be men and women of faith—and to produce others as well—who have high levels of Christian devotion, expertise, and accomplishment with both "trowels and muskets."

Might we ever remember the man, the scholar, and disciple Neal A. Maxwell with appreciation for both his contributions and the responsibility we have to meet the potential he has seen for us.