

"He Will Help You Fulfill Your Noble Dreams"

by
Michael Ballam

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Thank you for that wonderful introduction. I need to put a caveat—that means a warning—on that beautiful introduction. It is true that I sang a command performance at the Vatican and at the White House, but shortly after doing so the Pope died and we impeached the President. So you remain here at your own risk here. It is true that many singers of the Metropolitan Opera have come for very, very small fees. We have an ensemble company, which means that everyone is paid the same thing to do the same work, and they come because of the environment that we have tried to create. That is quite unusual to most opera companies.

I appreciated hearing about you having a forthcoming workshop called “Backpacks to Briefcases.” I’m one of those people that went from backpacks to briefcases and now back to backpacks, because I discovered that backpacks are a better way to get things around.

Today I want to talk to you about something very profound to me, something that was emblazoned on your building—it’s called “business.” But it has “LDS” in front of it. That implies something different. It implies a different ethic about your careers of choice. I want to talk to you about some things that I have learned about that in my over-half-a-century of existence.

It started back in junior high school when Utah State University for the first time decided to start a program called Vocational Guidance. Nobody had ever thought about doing that. But this was way back, oh, just around the advent of electricity, and they sent a wonderful young man to talk to us about what we wanted to do in life. And he handed us a list of occupations, and I looked through the list of occupations and *nothing* held any interest for me whatsoever. He said, “Well, what do you want to be?”

And I said, “I want to be an opera singer.”

And he said, “You can’t.”

And I said, “What do you mean, I can’t?”

He said, “Well, first of all, have you ever met an opera singer?”

I said, “No.”

He said, “Have you ever been to a professional opera performance?”

I said, “No.”

“Well then, you can’t. And besides, it’s not on this list.” And it wasn’t on that list, and I suspect it’s still not on that list.

And I said, “But I’m going to be an opera singer.”

And he said, “And what makes you think that?”

And I said, “Because I’ll do whatever it requires to do that.” And I sort of did. Statistically, I now realize it would have been easier for me—a kid from River Heights, Utah—to become Karl Malone than to become a professional opera singer. Oh, I don’t mean genetically—I’d have to change. I mean to become a professional athlete. Your odds are better to do that because there are programs to enable you to do that. When I was planning to be an opera singer, there were no programs to help you do that, except the school of hard knocks. Subsequently that has changed, and the Utah Festival Opera in Logan is one of those institutions to enable people to do that, to have their dreams come true.

But I knew I could do it because, you see, in the seventh grade I had a teacher who taught me something very profound. Her name was Tilda May Poulson. Some of you may know who she is. She taught at South Cache Junior High School, and formerly, before that, at South Cache High School. She taught everyone’s brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and parents and grandparents and great-great-grandparents, and I think she was teaching English there when Noah got off the ark.

Everyone was afraid of Tilda May Poulson—afraid of her because she was so “stern.” That’s the word they used. Well, in those days you would draw one of three sections of English out of a fishbowl—7-1, 7-2, 7-3. She was 7-2. As I went towards that fishbowl, I thought, “Now, what are my odds? Those are pretty good odds that I won’t pull her out.” I mean, those are odds that would work in Las Vegas. But I drew out 7-2. And I thought, “Oh, dear.” Actually, it ended up being one of the best things that ever happened to me.

I remember the first day we arrived in class. Miss Poulson began speaking to us and I thought, “Why isn’t she standing up from behind her desk?” And then I realized she was. “Why was everyone afraid of this little, diminutive lady?” I wondered. She said, “Some of you are under the misunderstanding that I am here to teach you English. You are mistaken. I am not here to teach you anything. I am a resource to help you learn, but the responsibility for that is yours, not mine. And let’s get that straight right now.”

Whoa. What a concept. I wish some of my students at Utah State University would understand that concept, and we’d all do better. In other words, your teachers’

responsibility isn't to teach you anything. Your responsibility is to learn, and they are a resource to enable you to do that. But sometimes I think we've got it backwards. And Tilda May wanted us to understand how it worked.

She said, "I'm not interested whether you come to class or not. I'm interested in whether you are prepared when you come to class. And more than that, I'm interested in your integrity in telling me so. Henceforth, beginning tomorrow when I call the roll, you will not respond by saying 'here.' You will respond by either saying 'prepared' or 'unprepared.'"

Now the next day, as you might guess, someone decided to see if they could break this situation, so when she called his name—and I won't tell you his name because he ended up being a prominent citizen—he responded by saying "prepared." Now I don't know how it was that she knew it, but she didn't write down "prepared." She simply moved her glasses down a little bit and began to peer at him in the back row, and laser beams came out of her eyes and burned a hole right through his head until he confessed, "unprepared." I don't know how she knew that he knew that she knew that he knew, but no one ever tested the system again. Something about her sternness was enough that we always responded, and she admired us when we said "unprepared." She actually held this thing called integrity and honesty up here. She thought that was really important. And so do I, in spite of what the world would teach you. It's very important.

Our first assignment was to learn an epic poem entitled *Invictus*. Any of you know *Invictus*? It's a *big* poem. Would you recite it for us please? (Laughter) Our responsibility was to memorize it, and when we felt prepared we were to stand before the class and deliver it to the class. I determined I would be the first one up—not because I'm a high achiever. I am not. I am a coward, and I thought, "My chances of scrutiny are less if I'm the first one up. Because if I'm the twenty-sixth one up, I'll have twenty-five people to compare with. If I'm the first one up, there's just silence to compare me to." So I quickly learned it, crammed it into my head. It was poetry and I had a certain knack of learning words that seemed to rhyme. So the next time we came to class and she said, "Is anyone prepared?" I raised my hand.

"Come forward, Mr. Ballam," she said, "and recite us the poem."

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

She said, "Stop. What does that mean?"

Well, she never told us we had to know what it meant. She told us to memorize it. There is a difference, and she was about to teach us that difference. And I began to think on my feet. (Mumbling through the lines) "It means, our souls can't be conquered."

“All right,” she said. “Go ahead.” And I made it through. How I made it through I will never know, but I got to the end.

*I am the master of my fate
I am the captain of my soul.*

She said, “I don’t believe you. Say it again, and make me believe you.”

*I am the master of my fate
I am the captain of my soul.*

“I don’t believe you.” She made me repeat it 319 times, and I got so loud that they heard me all the way to Tooele. Then she let me sit down, and I was a quivering ball of flesh.

She said, “Let’s talk about this poem. “In it,” she said, “is a great message: That no one has the power to take away your dreams. And anything is possible, provided it’s noble. Do you understand what I mean by that?” she said to the class. “Noble means that it will bless other people more than it will you.” That’s a definition you ought to put on your refrigerator. Nobility is that which will bless others more than it will you. She said, “If your dream is noble, you may achieve anything. Anything!”

Boy. I took her at her word, and I decided I was going to be an opera singer, because I thought it was noble. Not all opera singers are noble; not all professions are noble. Actually, it’s not the profession, and it’s not the opera singer in itself. It’s how you choose to utilize the profession, how you choose to utilize your talents that decides whether it’s noble or ignoble. And I determined nothing was impossible.

When I was a senior in high school, my father took me to see my first Broadway musical, *The Man of La Mancha*. What a circle we’re going through, because I’m going to sing that this summer at Utah Festival Opera. I hadn’t thought of what a circle that is. That night as I sat there, I was grateful because my dad believed in me. My dad was not a musician, my dad was an athlete—a great athlete. But he sacrificed to take me to see my first Broadway musical.

As I heard the song “The Impossible Dream” being sung, I was convinced that Mitch Leigh and Joe Darion had written it for me, because I believed at that moment that nothing was impossible. Within the text is the recipe about making dreams that seem impossible—or that the world would tell you are impossible—come true. It has something to do with sacrifice; it has a lot to do with nobility. I think, as he says it, sometimes you have to literally walk through hell for a cause that is divine.

*To dream the impossible dream
To fight the unbeatable foe
To bear with unbearable sorrow
To run where the brave dare not go.
To right the unrightable wrong
To love pure and chaste from afar
To try when your arms are too weary*

*To reach the unreachable star.
This is my quest to follow that star
No matter how hopeless,
No matter how far.
To fight for the right
Without question or pause
To be willing to march into hell
For a heavenly cause
And I know if I'll only be true
To this glorious quest
That my heart will lie peaceful and calm
When I'm laid to my rest
And the world will be better for this
That one man, scorned and covered with scars
Still strove with his last ounce of courage
To reach the unreachable stars!*

(Cherry Lane Music Company, copyright 1965)

Did you get the message in there? If your dream is noble and you use enough brute force, and you're willing to listen to certain promptings, impossible things can be made possible.

I'm very impressed by the message that is left here. This building was built with great sacrifice. I know a good deal about architectural moldings. Mr. [Enos] Wall must have gone to great expense and hardship to put a message to you that you may never have known was here before. You look over there to the [ceiling] molding, or on either side, you'll see at the bottom there's some gold leafing molding. It's what we call a "rope" mold. It's fancified, so it doesn't exactly look like a rope, but it stands for holding together—many strands working together, forming some strength. Above it is a "dentil" mold. You can recognize that. It looks like teeth and you have gaps between them. And it stands for continuity. It keeps going on.

The one above it that's in gold leaf is a sacred one. You'll find it in a lot of sacred buildings, from ancient Israel to Rome to Greece to Salt Lake City. It's "egg and dart." Brigham Young liked it a lot. You see a little egg with a dart between it. The egg stands for life; the dart stands for death. And then there's another egg, you see. And this molding must always go in continuity, in a circle. It indicates that life is eternal. Though death comes, we are reborn again.

And above that, which is the highest form, is the "canthus" leaf. It's the symbol of prosperity; it's the symbol of the law of the harvest. What that really means is the Lord blesses us with bounty and we have an obligation to pay it back to His children. How appropriate, and in this building of all buildings. You will succeed in life if you choose to, if your dream is noble. You have set forth to come to school, and it will enable you to do so, with principles. Hence you will be entitled to success. This is to remind you that

every time you see that molding of the canthus leaf, you have an obligation that when you succeed, you must pay back and help others as well. How fitting.

I want to talk about somebody who's a hero of mine. I happen to have figured out early in my life that women are superior to men. It may have taken some of you gentlemen a little longer than it took me. The Utah Festival Opera has—I think our staff ratio is 85% estrogen, 15% testosterone in our building. And were it not for me, it should be 100% estrogen. Well, actually, I'm a tenor. That does actually raise that quotient a bit.

Some of my favorite characters in holy scriptures are females. There's not a lot of them, but one that I really adore is Queen Esther. A great lesson can be learned from Queen Esther. Do you realize that she is the only book that was found in its entirety in the Dead Sea Scrolls? There's a reason for that. Because [in it] God's name is not actually written out, either as *Elohim* or *Adonai*, and therefore the Jews could preserve it intact, without taking out God's name. Kosher Jews take out God's name to preserve the book in fear that it might be desecrated in some way. So we know exactly that what we have in the book of Esther is original. It's the story of a wonderful young thing, she's pretty, she becomes queen of the center of the world, Israel it will become. And something happens. Her uncle Mordecai comes to her and says, "There's trouble here. They're killing all our people."

"Who's killing all our people?"

"Your husband."

"What do you mean, my husband?"

"Well, not exactly your husband. One of his advisors, Haman, has sent forth a decree that anyone who worships Yahveh (Jehovah) shall be put to death instantly, and our people who worship Yahveh are being put to death. I want you to go talk to him," Mordecai says.

Esther says, "You know that's against the law." Times have changed. Queens couldn't talk to kings in those days unless they were invited to do so. So Esther risks her life to go speak to her husband about something rather important—her people.

So she goes to him, and he says, "What is it you want, Esther?" I think quite surprised.

She responds, "Before I ask you, I would like to serve you dinner." Ladies, here's a clue. And she prepares a mighty feast. I suspect it was not Kraft macaroni and cheese. Because it was such a magnificent feast, when she concluded he said, "I'll give you anything you want, Esther. Anything. Including my kingdom. What do you want?"

She said, "Stop killing the children of the lineage of the house of Judah."

"I'm doing what?" This was news to him.

She said, "Haman has set forth into the law a decree whereby those people are being executed for their religious beliefs."

The king said, "Is that true?" And they inform him that it is, indeed, true. He calls forth Haman; he says, "Because you have done this, you will lose your life, and this law has been eradicated." And Haman is killed. And the people of Israel are saved. (See Esther 4-7)

Esther—Hadasa in Hebrew—means "she saved her people." They don't use the word "hospital" in Israel; they use the word "hadasa," which means Esther, as a sign of respect to her that her name is saving the people. It says in the book of Esther that Mordecai said, "thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this." (Esther 4:14)

Has anybody got a Palm Pilot I can borrow for a second? Okay here's a Palm Pilot. The Lord must have an amazing Palm Pilot. I mean, think about it. Mine is sitting out in the car; I forgot to bring it in. But on it is my past, my present, and my future. I put it all there. And I can pull it up. I've forgotten that dentist appointment. I write in "dentist—find" and it tells me when I'm going to go to the dentist. A man invented this. Imagine what God can do. Esther was in his Palm Pilot, that "for such a time" as that moment, He was going to place her in the palace where she could change the course of history. He knew that; He put her there. And He put all of us here, at this moment. Esther happened to be one of those who was receptive to what He wanted, and what He had in mind. In other words, their Palm Pilots were in synch with each other.

Paul was walking down paths to Damascus, and he suddenly gets zapped. Why? Because God needed him. Why did God need him? Because he was the only one who could carry the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. The only one. He was not one of the anointed good guys. He was, according to the scriptures, an enemy to God. I hope none of us in this room would be characterized in that way, but he was. But the Lord needed him. Why? He spoke Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew, Latin; he was a Roman citizen, which meant he could travel. None of the Twelve could do that, and none of them could communicate if they did. Paul could do that, and God zapped him on the road to Damascus, and said, "I need you. Now. Thou wast appointed at 'such a time as this.'" A reluctant Paul finally saw the light and did the Lord's bidding, and became the most important missionary of history. He carried the Gospel forward when all of the Twelve were gone.

President Woodhouse alluded to a conversation that we had that was not unlike that. I was not on my way to Damascus; I was on my way to Caracas, Venezuela to sing Alfredo in *La Traviata* when all of a sudden I couldn't sing. And then I couldn't talk. And then I couldn't walk. And I was very troubled. I went to New York City to see the best doctor in the business, and he said, "You're dying, and this is the tip of the iceberg. Go pay the receptionist on your way out."

I went to Houston, Texas to see a renowned doctor whom I loved, who said exactly the same thing, but he said it with tears in his eyes. He said, "I'm sorry. I don't know what

it is, but this is likely your last chapter.” I didn’t like that news. I went to Denver, and finally after I got the third response that was the same, I decided I wanted to come back to Utah where my father, who was in the medical industry, might be able to help me. So I did.

And while I was there, I discovered they were going to tear down an old opera house in my hometown. I had very little strength, but I said to the owner, because he too was diagnosed with a terminal disease, “If this is our last chapter, let’s do it with a bang! Why don’t you give that theater to the city, and I’ll talk to some of my friends, and let’s see if we can restore it back to the original full measure of its creation—an opera house.” And we did.

And then I got better, and so did he. It was through intervention of the medical community, but more than that it was through the prayers and fasting of my stake, who interceded and asked the Lord to heal me, which he did—temporarily, I hope for long term. But when I got well again, and my voice came back stronger than it was before, somehow going and continuing what I was doing didn’t seem as important as trying to make a difference here, where I felt we could literally change the course of history. We could show the world a better way, and I think He has preserved my life to do that. I think perhaps I was appointed “for such a time” as that. And so were you. So were all of us.

Joseph Smith, a young boy born in 1805, at the age of fourteen receives the most important revelation of all time. Why? Why Joseph? Was it because he had so much political power that he could tell the world so quickly? Was it because he was from noble heritage and royal birth, that he could tell the world through his diadem and his staff and his crown? Was it through the great education that he had before? He possessed a special gift. It’s called humility. Probably as much as anybody ever had. And the Lord needed him at that moment in time.

Brigham Young, and his special skills of colonization. Gordon Bitner Hinckley—a man born with a desire to spend a career in the media—television, radio, motion pictures, print. And what is he doing? He’s in the media—television, radio, motion pictures and print. Have you thought about that? Of all the people in the world who could have been president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when the Olympics came and the world looked at Salt Lake City, who better to tell our story than Gordon Bitner Hinckley. Has there ever been anyone in history who could have done that better? A man raised up to that purpose. A man who was appointed “for such a time as this,” with special gifts given him directly from God.

And so everyone in this room has that same characterization. All of us have special gifts given us directly from God. In Esther’s case it was beauty that brought her into the palace. In Moses’ case it was his Hebrew lineage, his being put in the Pharaoh’s house. Paul—it was his language ability, his birth, his ability to travel because he was a Roman. For Joseph it was his humility. With Brigham it was his colonization skills. With

Gordon Bitner Hinckley, it is his understanding of communicating ideas. All of those gifts, given by God, directly to them.

And all of those special gifts are given directly to you. How, then, do you utilize it? By staying in touch with Him, every single day, and asking that His will be done. It may not take you in the direction you wish to be. I am not anywhere near where my agenda was taking me. I expected to die at the age of 102, being shot by a jealous tenor, sustaining a high C on a world operatic stage.

But that's not what I'm doing. I'm doing something else, because the Lord literally—and I hadn't thought of this until today—the Lord literally grabbed me by the *throat*, to get my attention. Because I wasn't listening. I was telling the Lord—and there is a difference. The Lord answered my prayers, which were always about, "I want to sing this in this company, help me do that..." And He did. That works to a certain point—your point. But like Tilda May told us in the seventh grade: If you really want to make a dream that seems impossible, possible, your dream has to be noble. My dream was not entirely noble. It was somewhat self-serving.

I hope I can fulfill the rest of my days in pursuit of that which is noble, because I can tell you it's much more fulfilling. When you go to bed at night, you feel better about yourself. We have an obligation to fulfill a mighty stewardship. We promised, when we became members of this Church, that we would seek after that which is noble, that which is virtuous, lovely and of praiseworthiness. Are you doing that? In your career pursuits, are you going through the admonition of Paul to make sure that which you choose to do will make the world a better place?

I'm going to conclude with a song. You know the words, because they should be your words, though they were originally spoken by Paul, and quoted by Joseph Smith. They now should be your words, because you promised these things. As I sing this, don't listen to the music of Sandy Ruconich and David Zabriskie. Don't listen to me. Listen to you! And see how you're doing with your promise.

I leave you my testimony that if we will seek after that which is noble, stay close to the Spirit of the Lord and have noble desires, He will bless us to make the impossible a reality. And I say that in His blessed name, Jesus Christ, amen.

"We Seek After These Things"

*If there is anything virtuous
If there is anything lovely,
If there is anything which is of good report
We seek after these things.
If there is anything virtuous
If there is anything lovely,
If there is anything which is of good report,
We seek after these things.
We believe all things*

*We hope all things
We have endured many things
And hope to be able to endure all things.
If there is anything virtuous,
If there is anything lovely,
If there is anything which is of good report
We seek after these things.
If there is anything which is of good report
We seek after these things.
We seek after these things.*