

## **Flags, Flyers, and Handkerchiefs: Creating Significant Learning Experiences**

---

We got a hammock this year, and we stretched it underneath the apple trees in the quiet corner of the backyard. What a pleasure it has been to read in that hammock this summer. So at the beginning of another school year, I'm making some connections with the different books I've recently read. The single most important connection I've made is that ordinary people doing their best at ordinary jobs achieve extraordinary and significant results. Let me first share some of the books I've been reading and then suggest how they're having an impact on me as I prepare for my classes.

My cousin and his family came from New York to visit. I told him that I had just finished reading Stephen Ambrose's *Band of Brothers* about a group of ordinary young men as they trained as paratroopers during World War II. I was intrigued by a group of men, boys really, boys the age of our students, who could form such a tight, united unit who truly cared for each other. This deep sense of commitment became more and more evident as they fought in some of the most horrendous battles of Europe including Normandy, Bastogne, and the invasion of Hitler's Eagle's Nest fortress. These ordinary boys performed extraordinary service.

My cousin recommended that I read James Bradley's *Flags of Our Fathers*, the story of the six men immortalized in the photograph of the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima. Bradley's father is the soldier who is the most visible of the six. Of course, Bradley grew up knowing his father was one of the six, but he also grew up answering the phone lying that his father was away on a fishing trip when reporters would call trying to get an interview. It wasn't until after his father's death in 1994, when the family discovered a hidden box containing all of his father's military materials, when they learned the significant but quiet role his father had played during his time as a Navy medic in World War II. In the box, the family had found the Navy Cross, the highest award granted by the Navy for his father's heroic efforts in saving troops' lives while he was on Iwo Jima—the family knew nothing of his deeds or experiences. He never talked about the war, especially Iwo Jima. Bradley began his quest by writing the story of these six men.

Iwo Jima is a small island—only 5-1/2 miles long and 2 miles wide. It is a volcanic island with no vegetation or water. Before the war, Japan mined the island for sulfur, so it also smells. The US knew there were troops on the island because of the airstrip and anti-aircraft guns that shot down any planes heading towards Japan. To prepare for its invasion of Iwo Jima, the US spent ten weeks bombing the island from carrier based planes and medium bombers—the heaviest bombardment up to that point in World War II. The US thought it would be an easy battle.

What the US did not know was that the Japanese had converted the island into an underground engineering marvel fortress. Safe from the US bombs, was a city of 22,000 Japanese troops. Mount Surbachi, the volcano mountain on which the famous flag was raised did not reveal the seven stories of structures buried beneath. Included in this hidden city was a 400 bed hospital with the best medical equipment and supplies.

An armada of 800 US ships headed toward Iwo Jima in February 1945 with 70,000 American troops. The battle of Iwo Jima was a slaughter on both sides. Nearly 30,000 American soldiers were killed and the same amount wounded. Over 20,000 Japanese were killed. On the fourth day, a small American flag was raised on Mount Surbachi, but the battle continued for thirty-three more days. The day after the small flag raising, the command wanted a large flag raised so it could be seen from all over the island. War photographer Joe Rosenthal who died earlier this month just happened to turn around to see six soldiers struggling to plant a flag pole made from a 100-pound water pipe found on the mountain. Rosenthal didn't even have time to look through his camera lens—he just aimed and took pictures.

These six men had just reached the top by fighting their way up. They were just doing their various jobs when they were asked to help raise a flag, and without questioning they pitched in to help. And a photographer who was just doing his ordinary job of documenting a battle, captured an extraordinary moment. These six men and the photographer never saw themselves as heroes—just people doing their jobs. Incidentally, three of the flag raisers were killed just several days after the flag raising.

Another example of ordinary people becoming extraordinary through seemingly insignificant actions is sixteen year-old Helmuth Hübener and his two friends. In Richard Lloyd Dewey's *Hübener vs. Hitler*, Helmuth is the youngest resistant fighter tried and executed by the Third Reich, with death orders signed personally by Hitler. These three young LDS boys from Hamburg distributed flyers written by Helmuth on the LDS branch typewriter condemning Hitler and the war. Because of the boys' beliefs in freedom gained from the Book of Mormon, primary, priesthood, and church meetings, and because of their fluent English because of the American missionaries, they began to listen to the forbidden BBC broadcasts and distributed the truth around Hamburg.

The sixteen year-old boys are arrested by the Gestapo, one boy just turning sixteen only the week before. They are tried before the Supreme Court, and before the immense red Nazi flag draped room, and before the Supreme Court justices dressed in their same-red robes, Helmuth majestically stands to condemn Hitler and his regime and bears his testimony of a God who will judge Hitler and his leaders for destroying Germany's democracy. Helmuth is sentenced to death, and at just seventeen years-old is executed by guillotine, writing his testimony moments before his death. The other two boys are sentenced to ten years of hard labor in a prison camp. One of the boys, Rudi, after his release from prison when the British liberated him, became the first German called to a full-time LDS mission after the war.

These are ordinary boys doing something significant, even if they didn't realize it at the time.

I reread David Crowder's *The Spirit of Ricks* and am so grateful for ordinary individuals such as Jacob Spori, Thomas E. Ricks, and the faithful members of the Bannock Stake who sacrificed so much to start a school in Rexburg. Spori, for instance, went without a salary, but continued to teach and administer the school, and he used his own resources

such as his wife's recent inheritance of several thousand dollars, to keep the school going. The stake members funded the school through assessment and not through Salt Lake. During the Great Depression, the church could no longer fund the college, so under the guidance of newly-appointed President Hyrum Manwaring, the church authorized Manwaring at first to sell the school to the state of Idaho, and when they wouldn't buy it because of no funds, Manwaring offered to give Ricks Academy to the state for free if the state would just pay the faculty. The state refused. Eventually, the community of Rexburg and the local stake members kept the school functioning until the church decided to keep and help fund the school. Hyrum Manwaring was an ordinary man doing his job the best he could.

Also John C. Clarke led an intense fight to keep Ricks Academy in Rexburg rather than move it to Idaho Falls. Despite their efforts, the church made the decision to go to Idaho Falls. Clarke was to obtain property—a year later, the church reverses its decision. Clarke during his incredible administration also was notified that in just over a year, Ricks College would become a four-year college. After remarkable preparation, Ricks becomes a four-year school. One and a half years later, President Clarke receives word that Ricks will return to a two-year status. Though thoroughly disappointed, and probably frustrated, President Clarke always fought to protect and guide Ricks College while still following and supporting the Brethren.

These are ordinary people unknowingly making significant contributions while doing their jobs the best that they can.

I also reread Jim Collins' book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap. . . and Others Don't*. Collins maintains that good is an enemy to great and that most businesses are good, but very, very few are great. He wanted to identify what made a good company great while nearly all other companies remain only at good. He identified a great company as a company that remained at or below the general stock market for fifteen years, then after a transition reached a cumulative return at least three times the general market for the next fifteen years. He wanted a company that would sustain that success, and three times is significant, because major companies such as 3M, Boeing, Coca-Cola, GE, Intel, Merck, Procter & Gamble, Wal-Mart, and Walt Disney achieve 2.5 points above market. Collins is targeting companies he suggests are greater than these powerhouses.

The rest of Collins' book discusses his six conclusions. So much of this can have a direct bearing on us at BYU-Idaho and on our classes. Of course, we don't have time to discuss these today, but again and again, I'm learning that ordinary people doing ordinary things in extraordinary ways can achieve something significant. For instance, while examining the leadership of good and great companies, Collins identifies five levels of leaders, and these can also include classroom teachers, and the great companies all have a Level 5 Executive Leader, one who builds greatness through a blend of personal humility and professional will. Other characteristics of a great company or great classroom room include what Collins calls "Confronting the Brutal Facts (Yet Never Lose Faith), the Hedgehog Concept of staying simple and doing what you do well, exceptionally well, a

culture of discipline because disciplined people don't need a hierarchy, and technology accelerators by becoming pioneers of carefully selected technologies.

So many of his characteristics of a great company are easily evident in so many of your classrooms I visit each semester.

Finally, L. Dee Fink's *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses* has helped me make the connection and transition with these ideas into my classes this fall. I'm viewing students and teaching differently, and I'm excited to get started.

Fink suggests that when these six elements interconnect with each other, significant learning takes place. His six elements include: foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn. Of course, you see these six elements and the website discussing significant learning printed on the program. Today's theme of creating significant learning experiences comes from Fink's book, and each of the wonderful individuals who willingly accepted to make presentations this morning, have used any of these elements as starting points for their discussions. I invite you to check out the website to see how these principles can apply to your own teaching.

Now, as I conclude I want to share a very personal experience I have had this summer—even a sacred experience. I continue to question whether I should share it because it really does mean so much to me, but I know of no other group of people whom I trust and respect as much as you. I've been home from my mission to Finland for thirty years. In July, I received a phone call from a missionary from Pocatello whom I haven't heard from for thirty years. He had just arrived late to his stake conference when he ran into a missionary he and his family had known in the Czech Republic while he worked there for several years at an international corporation. This young returned missionary introduced his wife who was from St. Petersburg, Russia. With them at that stake conference was a 70 year-old sister from Finland who as a temple worker a couple years earlier and had befriended the new bride as she was receiving her endowments in the Sweden Stockholm temple. This sister had come from Finland to visit her young friends.

The first thing this Finnish sister asked my missionary friend was if he knew an Elder Keller. She then told him that Elder Keller and his companion had come to her apartment and wanted to talk about religion. She taught Lutheranism in the public schools, and didn't want to talk religion, but she wanted to practice English. Elder Keller agreed to a compromise—she could practice English if he could practice his Finnish by giving her memorized lessons. She agreed, but whenever Elder Keller asked a religious question or tried to turn the conversation to religion, she would change the subject. They repeatedly invited her to church, but she refused because she would go each weekend to the country to stay with her brother and his family.

Without notice, Elder Keller was transferred and the missionaries stopped coming. However, Elder Keller had written her a farewell letter bearing his testimony. That letter troubled her because she didn't feel she had been honest with the missionaries. She

decided to read the Book of Mormon in one weekend, and by Monday morning, she was ready to have the missionaries come to her, but this time to teach her the gospel. That same weekend she called her brother in the country and told him about the Book of Mormon, because what she didn't tell Elder Keller when he was practicing the missionary discussions in Finnish, is each week, she would share with her brother and his family the same discussions. They were all soon baptized, and her brothers' children are now returned missionaries and married in the temple.

For thirty years she has been a faithful stalwart in the church. She has served a couple temple missions since retiring. So she asked my missionary friend if he knew Elder Keller. My friend was in the process of moving his family to Belgium for the next few years, so it took him a couple days to get to me, but then he shared this story with me.

What he didn't know is that on my mission I did not experience a single baptism. In some respects I came home feeling that my mission was not a success. Part of this stems from the fact that my twin brother was on his mission at the same time to the Philippines, and he literally had hundreds of baptisms. I came home without one.

Coincidentally, this sweet sister and her friends were late for the stake conference because they had driven to Rexburg to see the new temple—they were only a few blocks away from our home, but neither of us knew it. She had already returned to Finland by the time I heard the story, but I was able to get an email address. Sister Saarikivi and I now email each other. She was the one who told me that that letter written by a twenty-year-old boy changed her eternity and that she keeps that letter with her patriarchal blessing. She's sending a copy of the letter to me, and I'm sending her this handkerchief with her initials monogrammed on it, so she can wave it in the Finland Helsinki temple dedication in October for me.

I've learned to appreciate the little-discussed parable of the secret seed. I think it is only recorded in Mark, and it is framed by the more developed parables of the sower and of the mustard seed. The Savior gives this parable of man planting a seed and the mysterious growth that follows:

So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground; And should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how. For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, and after that the full corn in the ear. But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come. (Mark 4: 25-29)

This farmer plants a seed, but what we don't see is that he does the ordinary work of preparing the soil and making the growing conditions as ideal as possible before planting the seed. After planting the seed, he can't do much else. He gets up night and day to check, but he doesn't see what is happening to the seed—he doesn't see the miracle of the growth because of the surrounding conditions and because of what is within seed itself. The farmer can't make the seed grow, he can't do anything but watch the blade,

the ear, and the corn develop on its own. He doesn't know how it happens, but what does happen is that an extraordinary and significant fruitful harvest results because of his planting.

Brothers and sisters, we do have significant experiences with our students whether we know it or not. We touch their lives, and they certainly touch ours. This is evidenced by the phone calls, emails, and visits we continue to get over the years from these incredible people. We do very good work here, but it's time for us to move forward from good work to great work, from great work to greater work. What we do is very much indeed a significant part of building the kingdom both here on earth and in the heavens. We have been blessed with a great responsibility but more meaningfully, we've been blessed with gifts of the Spirit and endowments from our Heavenly Father as we continue being ordinary people doing ordinary things in incredibly extraordinary and significant ways.

May Father bless us as we do His work, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.