

Power in Patterns



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For Commencements like this, I like to give messages that can be summarized in a short phrase in the hope that the graduates might possibly remember it in the days and even years to come. Today, because I think this is an especially bright class, I am going to give you two short phrases that convey the same idea: one is five words: “character is higher than intellect,” and the other is six: “not a mind without a soul.”

This latter phrase comes from the conclusion of Chaim Potock’s novel *The Chosen*. It occurs several times in a moving speech by a Jewish father to his cherished eldest son who is about to leave home and go out into the world. The phrase articulates a father’s deepest priorities. I believe that it also speaks to our Heavenly Father’s priorities. And it articulates mine. Reb Saunders wants to tell his son that as important as is to develop a bright mind, it is more important to cultivate a compassionate soul: “not a mind without a soul.”

These six words capture in other terms what David O. McKay repeatedly taught at the founding of this university: namely, that “character is higher than intellect.” The prophet knew that it was important for BYU–Hawaii (then Church College of Hawaii) to produce students with well-trained minds. But, like Reb Saunders, President McKay knew that it was even more important to prepare students with high moral character—with strong souls. Only those whose minds and souls have been properly educated can become the genuine gold that the Prophet David O. McKay envisioned.

Hence, at both the groundbreaking in 1955 and the dedication of our first buildings in 1958 President McKay quoted a saying that actually originated with Ralph Waldo Emerson: “character is higher than intellect.” Pres. McKay loved this thought. He quoted it often in his ministry. I first heard it from him as a boy, and I immediately loved it too. Only later did I learn that it came from Emerson’s famous address to the Phi Kappa Phi Society at Harvard, called *The American Scholar*. I want you, too, to love and embrace the priority of character to intellect, soul to mind.

Now in order to clarify the meaning of the phrase “not a mind without a soul” and hopefully inscribe it more deeply in your memory and into your hearts, let me share the touching story from which this phrase comes. Chaim Potock’s novel *The Chosen* tells of a Jewish boy named Danny and his rabbi father Reb Saunders. Danny is not just Jewish. He is a Hasidic Jew, meaning that he ascribes to a particularly strict, orthodox form of Judaism. And his father is not just a rabbi but a tzaddik, meaning an especially righteous spiritual leader, almost like a prophet to his community. Traditionally the role of tzaddik passes from father to son. So by right, Danny should become the community’s next tzaddik.

But Danny has other inclinations. He has a brilliant mind and an insatiable hunger for knowledge. These eventually lead him to want to leave the narrow confines of his Hasidic religious community, to give up his conspicuous Hasidic clothing, cut off his sidelocks, and strike out on his own to study at a secular university.

Reb Saunders anticipates this early on when he realizes that his little Danny was not just smart, but brilliant. But he feared Danny was all mind and no soul. He says: “when my Daniel was four years old, I saw him reading a story from a book. And I was frightened. He did not read the story, he swallowed it, as one swallows food or water. There was no soul in my four-year-old Daniel. There was only his mind. He was a mind without a soul. It was a story in a Yiddish book about a poor Jew and his struggles. . . . Ah, how that man suffered! And my Daniel *enjoyed* the story, he *enjoyed* the last terrible page, because when he finished it he realized for the first time what a memory he had. He looked at me proudly and told me back the story from memory, and I cried inside my heart. I went away and cried to the Master of the Universe, ‘What have you done to me? A mind like this I need for a son? A *heart* I need for a son, a *soul* I need for a son, *compassion* I want from my son, righteousness, mercy, strength to suffer and carry pain, *that* I want from my son, not a mind without a soul.’”

I believe that if God our Father looked down on you graduates today, he might say the same thing. Is he pleased with your academic accomplishments? Of course! Does he value your intellect? Certainly! The glory of God is intelligence. But Father in Heaven, as Reb Saunders, wants more, much more, from you than a well-trained mind. He wants your heart. He wants a soul full of compassion, righteousness, mercy, strength to suffer with and carry the pain of others. That is what He wants of his children. *Not a mind without a soul!*

I often tell my children that in God’s eyes goodness is more important than greatness; that in fact, to be good is to be great. This is because truly “character is higher than intellect.” Only those whose character is as bright as their minds qualify as genuine gold. Only those with great souls are truly great. Not a mind without a soul!

Reb Saunders witnessed the perils of someone who prioritized mind over soul in his older brother. “My brother was like my Daniel,” says Reb Saunders. “What a mind he had. What a mind. . . . But it was a cold mind . . . almost cruel, untouched by his soul. It was proud, haughty, impatient with less brilliant minds. . . . It could not understand pain, it was indifferent to and impatient with suffering.” Ultimately his brother left the faith. He “went away to France where he became a great mathematician” but no longer was he an observant Jew.

For Reb Saunders does not want to see this tragedy repeated in the life of his beloved brilliant son Danny. He agonizes, “How will I teach this mind what it is to have a soul? . . . How will I do this and not lose my son, my precious son whom I love as I love the Master of the Universe Himself?” Finally, to save his son, Reb Saunders contrives a scheme to help Danny take communion with his soul. He imposes a regime of silence on Danny, never speaking to Danny directly for years. Through silence, Danny learns to apprehend the world through his heart and soul and not just through mind, reason, and language. Through silence, Danny learns to “walk around inside [himself] in company with [his] soul.” Through silence he learns spirituality. Through silence he learns compassion, until at last he acquires the “soul of a tzaddik.” Reb Saunders knew that Danny would eventually leave his family’s little Hasidic community to enter the wider world. But “I had to make certain that his soul would be the soul of a tzaddik no matter what he did in life.”

My dear graduates: I send you forth today with this same desire in my heart. No matter what you do or where you go from here, I pray that you will leave BYU–Hawaii with the soul of a saint—of a Latter-day Saint—and not merely the mind of a scholar. May you remember the lesson expressed in these two simple phrases: “character is higher than intellect” and “not a mind without a soul.”