

# Forum



## LAVINA FIELDING

### THE BEST-KEPT SECRET

Last year I casually asked my brother, then a freshman at BYU's law school, how classes were coming. "You know," he said, "it's a funny thing. All the time I was going to school before, you'd kind of grouch around when you got an assignment, and when you got a *hard* assignment, you'd really complain. Well, our small group teacher gave us a tough case — a *really* tough case, and the other two small groups got kind of mediocre ones. That's what was funny: we were walking around kind of smirking at each other and the other two groups were grouching. It's a different atmosphere. Students are competing to learn and resent it when they don't."

I grinned at him. Lynn and I, and possibly that handful of freshmen law students, possess the best-kept secret in American education today — learning is *fun*. There is delight in the chase of mind after idea, in the dance of argument and exposition, in those moments of illumination when concept touches cortex with an almost audible hissing and a glory of what Christopher Morley called "cool, green light."

These are pleasures of the mind as palpable and as satisfying as those more lavishly and luridly celebrated pleasures of the body. Many students, I fear, mightily resist — not from impregnable virtue, but from a potent combination of fear and laziness. As Lynn mentioned, it takes a special setting sometimes for people to admit that they like learning, especially if it is associated with the machinery of education that taught us the socially acceptable stance of the "high school prisoner" — in classes against our will.

I remember as a graduate student in

English learning to avoid a direct answer to the question of "how's your dissertation coming?" The safest thing to say was "oh, you know," plus grimace. The questioner could thereafter make soothing sounds of consolation. But I was a coward. What I wanted to say was "Great! I'm having the time of my life!" The only problem with such an answer was that it always stopped the conversation cold. For a while I thought it was because the questioner was afraid of getting trapped by a monologue on western landscapes. Then I noticed that little animated my colleagues except discussions of the job market (dismal) and the freshmen English classes they were teaching (abysmal). One fellow retranslated part of *Piers Ploughman* instead of doing a paper — but he didn't want to talk about it. It was just a class project, none the more attractive for being self-inflicted. I remember discussing hobbies at a party of English graduate students and professors. I was the only one who read for pleasure out of five doctoral candidates and three professors. Shocked, I later asked my major professor, a man who taught Mark Twain and Henry James with window-rattling gusto, if I'd daught an unrepresentative group." No, you didn't," he said bluntly. "Scares hell out of you, doesn't it?"

It did. It still does. When I think of the simple satisfactions and the complex joys of learning — learning how to make a woodbox, learning French, learning why charity runs like a rainbow through the Book of Mormon, learning *anything* — I become more and more convinced that eternal progression is eternal education. Education is more than the acquisition of skills and information; it's the ability to solve problems in a framework that keeps

the parts congruent and textured. Learning by revelation, though rare for me, is one of the most breathtaking experiences I know — where a concept suddenly connects with audible clicks, rotates ninety degrees, and alters the structure of my understanding, like a wave of color passing over a landscape and making it brighter, bigger — more real, somehow.

As I try to remember how I made my discovery about the pleasures of learning, I can isolate a few elements. They're probably not the same for everyone. For one thing, my discovery was made in the absence of television. It didn't even come to our isolated valley until I was eight and then my family couldn't afford one. We still don't have one. That meant books and stories. I remember how we trailed Mama from stove to ironing board pleading for "John and Mary" or "the Gadianton Robbers." My older brother taught me to read when he started first grade. My mother, without a murmur, suffered through the endless adventures of Dick and Jane. We not only read aloud to each other, we made up stories and told them to each other. I still remember the thrill when I discovered figurative language; it was "where your treasure is. . . ." We were farmers and reading time had to be snatched from work, so imagine my pleasure when I finally became a student and my work *was* reading. It was heaven. I think I discovered my mind the way a baby discovers his toes, and I'm glad that I didn't have too many distracting rattles around.

My discovery was a private one; I didn't realize that was what was happening exactly. But I think the scholarly community consists of those who make the discovery and then find each other.

There are a few ways to recognize them,

and school, that setting of formal education, is a good place to look:

1. They do what's required for classes. There's a value to the discipline of mastering a subject by reading and writing that brilliance does not compensate for. And no one is in a position to evaluate a class until he has learned what it contains. I remember my anger, on the first day of a linguistics class, when a student who hadn't even bothered to purchase the text demanded that the teacher justify the course's "relevance." The teacher, a courteous man, tried, but finished by pointing out that relatively little beyond sheer survival skills can be immediately proved relevant to someone ignorant of the subject.
2. They do more than is required. I remember one teacher lighting up like a Christmas tree because I'd read a book he referred to — not on the reading list — and brought some of the ideas back to the seminar for discussion. I deserve no praise for such a simple thing. I am ashamed that it happened so infrequently.
3. They have discovered that humility is the best offense. Seeking knowledge, rather than sheltering the infinite vulnerabilities of their ignorance, leaves them at least temporarily free of ego's insatiable demands — in itself, a great happiness.
4. They make connections. One of the wonderful things about being a Mormon for me is that the gospel provides a three-dimensional framework of values so that all information immediately has a place where it belongs, a perspective from which it can be evaluated. It claims kin with powerful concepts and truths that make knowledge a growing home and an unfolding country whose coordinates are happiness and wholeness.