



Tools for the Road: Successfully Navigating the Doctoral Journey.

CHERYL EMPEY

Lesson 1: I Learned This Was a Unique Opportunity from the Lord.

I received an email, in the spring of 2010, inviting all those who would like to pursue a doctorate to meet with the University of Idaho. After speaking with my colleague about taking advantage of opportunities to progress, I knew that now was my time. I often advise my students to take advantage of opportunities that are uniquely theirs, and when I came to BYU-Idaho I knew the opportunity would present itself for me to receive a doctorate. My heart recognized this as my unique opportunity to move forward.

I went to the first meeting with little preparation, other than knowing this was where the Lord wanted me. They spoke of the time commitment, the financial obligations and several other items that I honestly did not understand. I had no idea how I was going to accomplish it. But I did know I was supposed to. I applied knowing only that the Lord wanted me to do this.

The acceptance letter came and classes began in the fall of 2011. The first day of class was interesting. We were all asked why we were there. A few told of what they wanted to study, others said it was just time, and many of us—I am sure by our expressions—were asking the same thing: Why am I here?

I often advise my students to take advantage of opportunities that are uniquely theirs, and when I came to BYU-Idaho I knew the opportunity would present itself for me to receive a doctorate.

Lesson 2: I Learned a New Language.

Our instructor started by saying we would all be learning together. He compared our next three years to building a plane in mid-air. This statement was both adventurous and terrifying. During the next three years, this statement would indeed become something of a meme for our cohort.

Since I was a small child, I have been fascinated with vocabulary and words. In class, I often found myself writing down new words such as “meme.” At the end of our weekly classes I would have a list of words on my paper as others appeared to have notes with charts and diagrams. At first these words seemed foreign and odd, especially when I spoke them. In time however, I found myself and class members using them correctly and in context. The correct pronunciation and usage brought pure delight to my soul. When I understood what was being discussed I enjoyed myself and appreciated this opportunity to learn.

I developed a love/hate relationship with words such as efficacy, pragmatism, constructivist, pedagogies, andragogy,

Life indeed moved on, and flower beds did not get weeded.

qualitative, quantitative, experiential, inferential, and dissertation. Even words with simple meanings became complicated. The meaning of the word “relationship” is much more complex than even Hollywood could portray. Simple words like “publish” or “plane” could generate strong emotions among our cohort and instructors.

In our writing, the word “that” could no longer exist. All measures were taken to identify and destroy it. Regardless of how many people and times you went over your work, there would appear this one nonsensical word. After hours of writing and time spent defending your paper from this invader, it sometimes seemed to reappear without warning. Words became the enemy and at the same time our salvation as we learned to access their meanings to communicate truth in written form.

Lesson 3: I Learned More about the Meaning of “Truth.”

One evening in our Research Philosophy course we discussed the meaning of truth. It became very clear to me that many renowned researchers had varying perspectives on truth. Truth has been debated since the beginning of time. Philosophies have been developed on the foundations of specific perspectives of truth. Civilizations have been governed and destroyed by someone’s perspective of truth. Truth can be relative, situational, limiting, freeing, and all consuming. Truth has been and will always be debated.

Many opportunities during my doctorate offered me a chance to reflect on what I knew to be truth. During this time I came to appreciate the thirteenth Article of Faith, which states that “We believe all things, we hope all things. . .” and so on. I also came to appreciate the way the Spirit teaches truth. He does not teach through a lengthy distribution of facts, a proven researched method, or even a loud debate. He brings forth truth to those that desire and seek through a still small voice. The truth is that we are all children of God. Being God’s children implies that we do not know all things now. We were created and we are intelligences. For me, the confusion and arrogance that can accompany the philosophizing of truth reinforced my belief that truth is real. It is simple, not complex. Truth is given to us through a loving Father in Heaven.

Lesson 4: I Learned Life Moves on With or Without You.

All the seasons came and went. The winter snow still fell, the spring bulbs still blossomed, the summer sun still warmed, and the fall colors still turned. All these events happened as I added hours of reading and writing to my daily routine.

Time never stopped; it only moved from one deadline to the next. My family still needed me, my church callings still required time, work demands still had my attention, and grading always piled up. The flower beds still needed weeding, people still needed to be loved, and music still needed to be heard. Life still moved forward.

During those years, five of my close family members died, each at their own time and place. Loss with its sorrow also brought a sense of priority and confidence in the Lord’s plan for me. My own mortality was even acknowledged as I lived through pneumonia and was diagnosed with adrenal fatigue. Life indeed moved on, and flower beds did not get weeded.

Lesson 5: I Learned This Experience has Been about Building the Kingdom of God.

I debated for some time with myself whether I even wanted to pursue a doctorate. Then the thought came that by obtaining this degree I could be better prepared to serve in the Kingdom of God here at BYU-Idaho.

The building the Kingdom has been of great interest to me. I even ask or survey my students daily as to what they are doing to build the Kingdom. Both informal and formal study has convinced me the Lord is in control, but the day-to-day work is to be completed by earthly men and women with pride and weakness, men and women also with faith and endurance.

The research I participated in was with the area of efficacy. Our small group of four studied self-efficacy, while individually I studied teaching efficacy. We found that BYU-I students have high self-efficacy. My personal research inferred the quality of training our young girls and young women receive in the LDS church is good quality with respect to efficacy. They are nurtured and raised to develop habits that strengthen efficacy. I observed that God’s church has developed some of the best

principles for teaching and learning, as part of His plan for building the Kingdom.

I once again appreciated being a women in the church. During the question section of my defense, I was able to clarify a misunderstanding about the importance of education for our LDS young ladies. It was my honor to explain that LDS girls and women are encouraged to pursue as much education as possible.

Sometimes, only prayer allowed us to unite and overcome our challenges.

In contrast, I also saw Satan work hard to magnify weaknesses. He did this through sowing insensitivity, pride, and a feeding of arrogance. I learned a certain kind of arrogance often accompanies people as they pursue higher degrees. Professors, instructors, and students alike can possess this arrogance. I recognized it in myself and in my cohort members.

Over time we each had to come to grips with our own weaknesses and the weaknesses of others. We had to build upon our own strengths to meet the needs of our groups. We had to exercise our faith in each other and in our mentor.

Our research seemed to be devalued by many, and we often felt like we were on a losing team. I felt Satan working hard to build distrust even between team members. Sometimes, only prayer allowed us to unite and overcome our challenges. Without prayer, feelings of neglect and despair hung over us like a shadow, our ideas were jumbled, and we could not communicate with each other effectively. We could make no progress.

Prayer became a habit of our small group. Each study session began with prayer. When we delayed our prayer, confusion invaded our work. But, over time our persistent prayers helped to bring peace and confidence to our hearts. We worked better together, and we learned that the many who seemingly did not value our research were a mere few who just did not understand.

We felt unfortunate as the last group to receive a major professor. But the day we met her, our prayers were

answered and lifted a heavy burden. She was truly a gift from God. She was a woman of God that appreciated our differences. She made an effort to understand our group by reading the Book of Mormon, and felt at home each time she visited our campus. When frustrations heightened she would calm us and ask us to have faith in her. Her confidence carried us many times. As group members we also carried each other.

As in building the Kingdom of God, our team members could not have finished their work alone; each of our individual contributions made a difference. Our cohort's contribution might be through career defining research, personal skill development, or expanded teaching and learning. May these five lessons help you to see the bigger picture as you move through the doctorate process. ❀

