

JOYFUL PAIN

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Pain hurts! It will always hurt. It will never not hurt, or so it seems. I can tweak, rethink, even willingly embrace martyrdom, but at the end of the day pain is still pain, and it hurts. Mortality hurts physically, emotionally, and spiritually—and what hurts me most is life’s unfairness. Do others feel the same about their pain? My experience with pain makes me marvel at the injunction to “take up the cross daily” (Mark 9:23). Does that injunction destroy any hope of finding joy? Am I destined to live a life of misery because mortality can be so painful?

Having joy in spite of pain has challenged better men than me. Consider Jacob’s refrain as he closed his spiritual record: “Time passed away with us, and also our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers...born in tribulation...hated of our brethren...wherefore, we did mourn out our days” (Jacob 7:26). Jacob seems so resigned. Actually, I wonder if his resignation is one of the secrets of finding joy. This same man who “mourned out his days” actually saw his redeemer in mortality (2 Nephi 11:2-3). Enos remembered that Jacob taught his posterity to find joy in the gospel: “And the words which I had often heard my father speak concerning eternal life, and the *joy of the saints*, sunk deep into my heart” (Enos 1:3, emphasis added). Perhaps a secret to finding joy in our troubled lives is learning to accept pain without self-pity—with a resolution like Jacob’s.

Trying to make sense of my own pain, I am learning to see pain as a teacher, friend, and forerunner of joy. I appreciate more fully Spencer W. Kimball’s classic insight on pain and suffering:

Being human, we would expel from our lives sorrow, distress, physical pain, and mental anguish and assure ourselves of continual ease and comfort. But if we closed the doors upon such, we might be evicting our greatest friends and benefactors. Suffering can make saints of people as they learn patience, long-suffering, and self-mastery. The sufferings of our Savior were part of his education.¹

Pain as friend and benefactor—do I really believe that is possible? Even though it demands a great deal of patience, I believe that the way we deal with the pain of mortality establishes the boundaries of joy now and throughout eternity. Befriending pain deepens my joy.

PAIN PRECEDES JOY

A fullness of joy is not possible without pain, but joy is not pain. Mortality repeatedly provides opportunities to draw meaning out of our

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negative, painful experiences. Like the world of bacteria and antibiotics, just when we think we have learned how to cope with pain, we come up against a new strain for which we have no immunity. Struggling, we wonder if we have learned anything at all from our previous pain.

Embracing adversity and pain as a means to discover joy is a challenging tutorial. And in this fallen realm, fairness need not apply before the painful testing and proving begins. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell so astutely observed: “If it is fair it isn’t a true trial. That is, without the added presence of some inexplicableness and some irony and injustice, the experience may not stretch us or lift us sufficiently.”² Yet such occasions are full of promise, “for ye receive no witness [read: joy] until after the trial of your faith [read: pain]” (Ether 12:6).

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If the way we manage pain sets the boundaries of our joy, we are best served when we view our life as an education and our pain as a teacher, providing learning and growth. Elder Orson F. Whitney wrote:

No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude, and humility. All that we suffer...builds up our characters, purifies our hearts, expands our souls, and makes us more tender and charitable, more worthy to be called the children of God...and it is through sorrow and suffering, toil and tribulation, that we gain the education which will make us more like our Father and Mother in heaven.³

How then do I allow pain to enrich my life and prepare me for a fullness of joy? How do I live the enlightened life that grows out of an appreciation for the pain and suffering of mortality?

NURTURING OTHERS IN PAIN

In his bestselling book, *The Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck defined love as “the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.”⁴ Does it not make sense, then, that our most intimate relationships are potentially the greatest source of our spiritual growth? It is our intimate relationships—those stamped “fragile, handle with care”—that hold the greatest capacity to produce joy and pain. The more intimate the relationship, the more likely we are to wound one another and be wounded ourselves. Perhaps this is why we are commanded to marry and multiply—to learn the art of nurturing from within the bonds of joy and pain. Intimacy requires a willingness to connect and identify with one another’s suffering and joy. Too often we associate intimacy with pleasure, forgetting that it is an invitation to share pain, willingly and forgivingly, as we seek the oneness the Savior offers.

In *The Peacegiver*, James Ferrell observes that “being mistreated is the most important condition of mortality, for eternity itself depends on how we view those who mistreat us.”⁵ I believe we learn the godly traits of patience, humility, and sacrifice as we willingly repent and forgive in response to the injury and pain of our most intimate relationships. And this imperative extends to all our relationships, from the greatest to the least: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40). Often those closest to us are treated like the least rather than the greatest.

No one understands pain borne of personal relationships better than Christ. At the core of his relationship with each of us is joyful pain. His pain and suffering ultimately makes possible his joy and rejoicing with us throughout the eternities. “And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain... even unto death...so great shall be his anguish *for the wickedness and the abominations of his people*” (Mosiah 3:7, emphasis added). In return he asks us to submit a broken heart and contrite spirit (3 Nephi 9:20).

Christ’s pain at Gethsemane and Golgotha was “suffering [which] caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore.” He said that he “*suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer* if they would repent,” and such a joyful anticipation, together with his love of the Father, helped as he “finished [his] preparations unto the children of men” (Doctrine and Covenants 19:16, 18-19, emphasis added). Jesus knows both the pain and the joy born of intimate relationships. Is there any more intimate and painful relationship than that of the Savior with those he redeems?

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EMBRACING PAIN TO KNOW JOY

Earlier in my life, I expended a lot of energy trying to live the pain-free life. Joy, in my mind, was defined as living with an absence of pain. You could have pain or joy, but not both. One of the secrets to discovering joyful pain lies in a correct understanding of the delicate balance between the two. Lehi taught, “it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11).

Now I seek to place joy and pain in equilibrium. I still suspect that too much pain may destroy the hope of joy. But joy results as I learn from painful experiences “to prize the good” (Moses 6:55). To embrace pain with dignity increases our capacity to experience joy. It enlightens us to better recognize and experience joy when it is manifested. And just as the sunny day needs a dark night to complete a full rotation, our joy is made full through our pain. “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy *cometh* in the morning” (Psalms 30:5, emphasis added).

Having been taught our “first lessons” in the world of spirits (Doctrine and Covenants 138:55-56) by perfect parents, we are now prepared to

receive the lessons of the second estate. The celestial classroom has been replaced with a telestial classroom; perfectly consistent parents with mortally inconsistent parents. This change of venue allows for a uniquely hands-on painful experience. Catherine Thomas observed of this “mortal practicum”:

As in my own experience, many of us carry from our childhood some consequences of our own parents’ spiritual infirmities which we unwittingly visit on our children. Of course, these imperfect family conditions are a function of a fallen world—an imperfect world of ignorance and weakness. Yet in its imperfection, this world provides a perfect learning environment...designed to give us experience, to develop our divine nature, and to draw us to the Lord Jesus Christ, our Master Teacher.⁶

These painful tutorials “in the joy of human love” come through imperfect teachers—“brother, sister, parent, child.” Nevertheless, they teach us to become “friends on earth, and friends above”⁷. The parent of a strong-willed child may learn lessons that can be taught no other way. How we conduct ourselves in such relationships will largely determine the quality of those relationships throughout the eternities.

Elder Maxwell taught that such lessons extend beyond the home to other settings. “Mortality presents us with numerous opportunities to become more Christlike...our customized trials such as experiencing illness, aloneness, persecution, betrayal, irony, poverty, false witness, unreciprocated love.... If endured well now, ‘all these things’ can be for our good and can ‘greatly enlarge the soul,’ including an enlarged capacity for joy.”⁸

SOFT HEARTS INVITE THE HOLY GHOST TO HELP US
EMBRACE PAIN

Through his perfect atonement, Christ knows how to intervene in the painful moments of mortality without interfering. He knows when to relieve or to sustain so as not to hinder our growth and learning (Mosiah 23-24). Jesus suffered far beyond what men could endure; he confronted the powers of evil and overcame. He understands the effort we must make to overcome pain and the debilitating self-centeredness that often accompanies it. The apostle Paul observed of Christ’s suffering: “For in that he himself hath suffered temptation [by pain and other means], he is able to succor them that are tempted” (Hebrews 2:18, 4:15).

The condition of our hearts determines our capacity to receive assistance from the Spirit. Resisting the Holy Ghost leaves us vulnerable to Satan’s enticement, which hardens hearts and reinforces pain. Yielding our hearts to God opens the door to greater instruction and joy. The scriptures refer to this as exercising a soft or a hard heart (Alma 12:10-14). We regulate

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the amount of joy and pain in our lives by the hardening or softening of our hearts. “He that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion.... And they that will harden their hearts, to them is given the lesser portion” (Alma 12:10-11).

When my heart is soft, I yield to God’s will, inviting greater joy into my life. By contrast, a hard heart invites self pity, selfishness, sin, and pain. To persistently resist the enticing of the Holy Ghost only worsens pain and suffering. A soft heart helps me welcome pain as a teacher, friend, and forerunner to joy. Alma taught, “Yea, I would that ye would come forth and harden not your hearts any longer;...if ye will repent and harden not your hearts, *immediately* shall the great plan of [happiness] be brought about unto you” (Alma 34:31, emphasis added). Soft hearts—or broken hearts—give suffering a purpose; our pain becomes a divine sacrifice, an offering preparatory to joy.

GOD CONSECRATES OUR PAIN FOR OUR GOOD

One thing we all have in common is pain and suffering. What distinguishes sufferers is the way we respond. We are completely sovereign in this choice, even when we think others cause us to feel a certain way. By responding faithfully we let the Lord teach and bless and refine us. Thus pain can either make us saints, “stand[ing] fast in [the] liberty wherewith [we] have been made free” (Mosiah 23:13), or it can condemn us to be “taken captive by the devil...[in] the chains of hell” (Alma 12:11). St. Augustine summarized the choice this way:

Wherefore, though good and bad men suffer alike, we must not suppose that there is no difference between the men themselves.... For even in the likeness of the sufferings, there remains an unlikeness in the sufferers...so the same violence of affliction proves, purges, clarifies the good, but damns, ruins, exterminates the wicked. And thus it is that in the same affliction the wicked detest God and blaspheme, while the good pray and praise. So material a difference does it make, not what ills are suffered, but what kind of man suffers them.⁹

Because of the atonement, even the pain of failures and missed opportunities is consecrated for our learning. No pain need be wasted; that which we suffer, or that which we inflict on others—it is all useful to the Lord.

His infinite atonement can make right the injustices of mortality, heal our wounds, and convert pain into joy as he gives “beauty for ashes” (Isaiah 61:3). My faith in Jesus Christ allows his atonement to do this work in me and in those I love. Richard G. Scott describes life as “an experience in profound trust...in Jesus Christ,...his teachings, [and] trust in our capacity as led by the Holy Spirit to obey those teachings for happiness now and for a purposeful, supremely happy eternal existence.”¹⁰ To the

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degree that I trust God, my response to pain can actually contribute to a “supremely happy eternal existence.” And he will even consecrate my prayers in behalf of others in pain (see 2 Nephi 33:4).

At the close of his life, Father Lehi blessed his posterity. To Jacob he said: “Thou art my first-born in the days of my tribulation in the wilderness...[and] thou hast suffered afflictions and much sorrow, because of the rudeness of thy brethren. Nevertheless,” Lehi promised, “[God] shall consecrate thine afflictions for thy gain” (2 Nephi 2:1-2).

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I believe that Lehi's faith in the atonement helped him leave a legacy of hope for his posterity. And despite his own encounters with pain, Jacob passed on that joyful hope. This is what I want for me and my family, for “we labor diligently to engraven these words [upon our hearts], hoping that our beloved brethren and our children will receive them with thankful hearts, and...learn with joy and not with sorrow, neither with contempt, concerning their...parents” (Jacob 4:3). ☺

NOTES

- 1 Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 98.
- 2 Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 31.
- 3 Quoted by Spencer W. Kimball, “Tragedy or Destiny,” *Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 6 December 1955), 6.
- 4 M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 81.
- 5 James L. Ferrell, *The Peacegiver* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 33.
- 6 M. Catherine Thomas, “A Parent's Love and Fear,” *Ensign* (July 1993), 21.
- 7 Follitt S. Pierpoint, “For the Beauty of the Earth?” *Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (USA: Corporation of the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), 92.
- 8 Neal A. Maxwell, “Apply the Atoning Blood of Christ,” *Ensign* (November 1997), 22.
- 9 Augustine, “City of God” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* volume 2. (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 5-6.
- 10 Richard G. Scott, “Trust in the Lord,” *Ensign* (November 1995), 16.