

LEARNING, OUR THEOLOGY

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When I was beginning kindergarten, my family lived in Los Angeles where my father, at the time, was pursuing a graduate degree at UCLA. Our home was situated just off Santa Monica Boulevard so that our backyard was adjacent to the side of the temple ground. This honestly seems like ancient history, but I can remember watching the crane hoist the Angel Moroni to its place atop the temple steeple, which at the time seemed as tall as an Empire State Building. I can also remember not long afterwards when serpentine lines of pre-dedication temple visitors wound around the corner of our home and up the sidewalk to the temple grounds. All of this left an indelible impression on my five-year-old mind.

Not long after the temple dedication, I remember being at school, a few blocks from home. I don't remember all the particulars—actually I remember more than I wish to recount. My teacher was giving me a scolding I very much deserved (I'm sure). Incensed, I charged out of the gate of the enclosed school yard and started for home. Unable to catch me, the teacher watched as I ran down the street. Bee-lining the streets of Westwood, I headed for home.

Once there, I hid under my bed until I was found by my mother, who had received a call from my frantic teacher. Before being paddled and sent right back to school with an apology, I was pressed by my mother: How had I managed to find my way home? I really don't remember my answer first hand, but my mom always loved to remind me how I responded: "Gee, Mom, I followed the Angel Moroni."

Reflecting on that experience now, I believe the temple is my way back home. The temple is the place where I learn about and make covenants to return to my heavenly home and father.

Growing up, I have often heard the temple called the Lord's university and have often wondered as I have sat in this chapel anticipating an endowment session, "What would the Lord have me learn today?" I often imagine that I'm listening to the endowment for the first time to see what ideas and impressions strike me at that particular time.

I like to think of the temple as a place where learning is ongoing. For me, the temple symbolizes so much—the presence of God in our midst, the purity and order of God, the physical reality of God (that He has literally a house wherein to dwell), the progression of our lives through mortality to hoped for celestial glory. All of this makes the temple rich

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in symbol. And along with all of this, the temple symbolizes for me the process and power of learning. The temple is a symbol that our Heavenly Father values learning in faith, that He expects us to seek and search for understanding.

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I would like to speak this morning about learning and about how Heavenly Father expects us to spend our life learning. I pray that what I have to share will motivate each of us here in two ways: (1) to recommit ourselves to learning and (2) to instill our love for learning within the heart and mind of each person we teach.

Jeffrey Holland, addressing the faculty of BYU as its president, said, “The fundamental reason for a ‘school in Zion’ is plainly and simply because... [learning] is our theology” (146). Elder Holland then rehearsed several revelations which clarify the Lord’s expectations about learning:

Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in... things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass;... a knowledge also of countries and kingdoms. (*Doctrine and Covenants* 88:78-79)

Seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith. (*Doctrine and Covenants* 88:118)

Study and learn, and become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people. (*Doctrine and Covenants* 90:15)

At this point, Elder Holland concluded, as he synthesized several additional revelations about learning: “Such knowledge will rise with us in the Resurrection, we are told, and most sobering of all is the warning ‘It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance’ (*Doctrine and Covenants* 131:6), for ‘the glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth’ (*Doctrine and Covenants* 93:36), and ‘light and truth forsake that evil one’ (*Doctrine and Covenants* 93:37)” (147).

The Prophet Brigham Young, whose name our institution now bears, once asked about our mortality, “What are we here for?” His answer? “To learn to enjoy more, and to increase in knowledge and in experience.” “The object of this existence is to learn” (qtd. in Holland 148).

President Gordon B. Hinckley continues to admonish the Saints to learn: “Acquire all of the education you can, even if it means great sacrifice...” (*Teachings* 172). “I do not care what you want to be as long as it is honorable. A car mechanic, a brick layer, a plumber, an electrician, a doctor, a lawyer, a merchant, but not a thief” (*Teachings* 172). “There is a tendency on the part of some graduates to say, ‘Now all of that is behind me.’ No [President Hinckley rejoins], there is much more ahead than there is behind... If you should stop [learning],... you will only

stunt your intellectual and spiritual growth. Keep everlastingly at it. Read. Read. Read. Read the word of God in sacred books of scripture. Read from the great literature of the ages. Read what is being said in our day and time and what will be said in the future” (*Teachings* 171). “I believe that the glory of God is intelligence, and that the Almighty takes delight in our efforts to improve and enrich and enhance our minds” (*Standing for Something* 60).

Brothers and Sisters, latter-day prophets have made it clear—learning is our theology. Elder John A. Widtsoe even went so far as to assert, “The support of education is, indeed, one test of the true Church” (qtd. in Holland 160).

What thrills me about our Father in Heaven’s relationship with us is that He teaches us how to keep his commandments. Learning is not unlike other commandments. In scripture and latter-day revelation, He shows us how to learn. Reminding ourselves of the Lord’s pattern for learning helps us in two ways. We establish a pattern to enhance our own learning. And we more capably help others learn.

For the next few minutes, I would like to share what I have discovered about the Lord’s pattern for learning.

I. THE LORD’S PATTERN FOR LEARNING REQUIRES US TO BE MEEK

In his essay “The Disciple Scholar,” Elder Neal A. Maxwell teaches us that the “primary attribute” of a disciple scholar is meekness. Each of us, he reasons, is deficient in our own particular ways. It is meekness which enables us to recognize these deficiencies and surrender ourselves to the Savior’s example and instruction through the Holy Spirit (12-13).

Often, I think, we equate meekness with weakness. However, they are not the same. Meekness more accurately equates with humility, patience, and submissiveness. Perhaps most of us here would agree that those students we most enjoy teaching have this quality of meekness about them. For example, I often sit in conference with my writing students. As we discuss their papers at my desk, some are so open to suggestion and excited about improving, I too am swept away in the moment. I feel like a real teacher. Then there are those who are so immediately defensive that the air of tension becomes palpable. Our exchange is strained. They challenge each suggestion. I sometimes catch them off guard when I finally say, “I can’t help you. You won’t let me.”

Do we see these kinds of patterns reflected in our own relationship with others and, most importantly, the Lord? The lesson seems to be: In meekness we are teachable, prepared for spiritual tutorials. In pride, however, we can’t even discern our need for growth because we think we already know everything. This latter situation reminds me of what

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my dad used to jokingly say, “I can always tell a well informed person, because his opinion coincides precisely with my own.”

We are all familiar with the Lord’s counsel: “to be learned is good if... [we] hearken unto the counsels of God.” The Lord, however, warns us of the foolishness of men: “When they are learned they think they are wise and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish” (2 Nephi 9:28-29).

This scripture reminds us that learning is good, if we follow the Lord’s pattern and seek learning in humility.

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This same attitude of meekness enhances learning in all of our pursuits—spiritual and secular. When 80 years of age and after publishing numerous scholarly volumes, Will Durant, the eminent historian, remarked in an interview: “Sixty years ago I knew everything; now I know nothing; education is a progressive discovery of our own ignorance” (qtd. in Butler 25). Here is a scholar who will never cease learning because his humility keeps his mind open.

The French philosopher-mathematician Pascal creates a metaphor to clarify how the humble person perceives the process of learning. Pascal describes a circle that by analogy contains that which is known. That which lies outside of the circle represents that which is not known. As the circumference of the circle enlarges to contain greater knowledge, the greater circumference also impinges on ever-larger areas of the unknown. Hence the paradox, education is a progressive discovery of our own ignorance. As President Hinckley teaches, “The more we learn, the more we are in a position to learn” (*Standing* 61).

And here’s an interesting aside: Researchers are discovering “the more you learn, the more you’re able to learn... One theory is that an active brain continues to grow... forming new dendrites, connections between nerve cells that allow cells to talk to each other. The more dendrites you have, the better able your brain is to store and retrieve information” (Paster 1).

But to the point, humility and meekness truly enhance our efforts to learn.

2. THE LORD’S PATTERN FOR LEARNING REQUIRES DILIGENCE AND SELF-DISCIPLINE.

Addressing the students of BYU in a devotional, President Hinckley remarked: “I deplore the terrible waste of the intellectual resources of so many people of this nation who devote countless hours watching mindless drivel” (“Experience” 35). Later in his address, President Hinckley adds, “To you, I say, don’t be a couch potato. Be a man or woman with a mind

and a will and a bit of discipline, with a zest for learning that will be cultivated in this institution while you are here and that will be expanded through all the years to come” (36).

I am interested in the verbs the Lord uses to characterize learning. I hear words like “*feast* upon the pleasing words of God,” “*seek* ye out of the best books,” “*search* these commandments,” “*study*, and learn, and *become* acquainted with all good books,” “give diligent heed to the words of eternal life.” Feasting, seeking, searching, studying, giving heed, becoming are all verbs suggesting much more than casual acquaintance with what we study. Rather, these verbs suggest that learning is hard work.

All of this reminds me of two legendary BYU professors when I was a student there, Eliot A. Butler and Hugh Nibley. When addressing students in a forum assembly, Professor Butler, a chemist, said: “To learn is hard work. It requires discipline. And there is much drudgery. When I hear someone say that learning is fun, I wonder if that person has never learned or... just never had fun. There are moments of excitement in learning; these seem usually to come after long periods of hard work, but not after all long periods of hard work.” Butler then claims for a person to be educated “one’s own discipline must cause the learning. A favorite line from the Wisdom of Solomon bears on this: ‘The very true beginning of [wisdom] is the desire of discipline’” (26).

Along these lines, Hugh Nibley criticizes an attitude he sensed rampant at BYU; it goes something like this. I quote Nibley in all of his irony: “We are not seeking for truth at the BYU; we have the truth....The young, with their limited knowledge, are particularly susceptible [to this attitude]....Why do it the hard way, they ask at the BYU, when God has given us the answer book?” (115).

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Again, the Lord has the answer. “You have not understood,” the Lord chastens Oliver Cowdery in Section 9 of the *Doctrine and Covenants*. “You have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 9:7-8). Here the Lord makes clear that “in the sequential relationship between reason and revelation, it is important that reason have what we can call ‘the first word’ and that revelation have ‘the last word’” (Oaks *Lord’s Way* 66).

On the occasion of Dallin H. Oaks’ inauguration as the President of BYU, Harold B. Lee taught: “The acquiring of knowledge by faith is no easy road to learning. It will demand strenuous effort and continual striving by faith. In short, learning by faith is no task for a lazy man” (91). Harold B. Lee continued, “Someone [Brigham H. Roberts] has said, in effect, that,

such a process requires the bending of the whole soul, the calling up from the depths of the human mind and linking the person with God. The right connection must be formed; then only comes knowledge by faith, a kind of knowledge that goes beyond secular learning, that reaches into the realms of the unknown and makes those follow that course great in the sight of the Lord (91).

This pattern for learning is difficult in our time because we seem to live in a culture pre-occupied with entertainment and easy living. Yet, I honestly believe, the Lord's pattern is clear. Great treasures of truth—often hidden—are revealed to those who are willing to diligently search for them. Learning is often not easy.

3. THE LORD'S PATTERN FOR LEARNING REQUIRES US TO MOVE BEYOND THE MERE ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE TO UNDERSTANDING AND APPLICATION.

Nephi taught, "Feast upon the words of Christ." Feasting, again suggests diligent study. But Nephi then adds in the same verse: "for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do" (2 Nephi 32:3). Combining "feasting" and "doing," we understand the Lord's pattern for learning includes study and application.

I am amazed at how many contemporary scholars echo Nephi's insight about moving beyond the mere acquisition of information to an understanding and application of that knowledge. Mathematician Jacob Bronowski wrote, "No scientific theory is a collection of facts.... [Rather] science finds order and meaning in our experience" (10-11). Writer Theodore Roszak, says, "There's 'data, data everywhere, but not a thought to think'" (qtd. in Muscatine and Griffith 55). Physicist Richard P. Feynman bemoans how his college-level students "memorize everything," but don't know what anything means (52). The famous nineteenth century naturalist Louis Agassiz told his students, "Facts are stupid things until brought into connection with some general law" (qtd. in Scudder 197). The poet T.S. Eliot characterized this predicament as an "'endless cycle' in which 'wisdom' is 'lost in knowledge' and 'knowledge' is 'lost in information.'" (qtd. in Oaks "Focus" 82-83).

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In our most recent General Conference [April 2001], Elder Oaks also referred to the challenge of sinking in this glut of information, never understanding how to discern the significant. To illustrate this problem, he shared this humorous story as a warning:

Two men formed a partnership. They built a small shed beside a busy road. They obtained a truck and drove it to a farmer's field, where they purchased a truckload of melons for a dollar a melon. They drove the loaded truck to their shed by the road, where they sold their melons for a dollar a melon. They drove back to the farmer's field and bought another truckload of melons for a dollar a melon.

Transporting them to the roadside, they again sold them for a dollar a melon. As they drove back toward the farmer's field to get another load, one partner said to the other, "We're not making much money on this business, are we?" "No, we're not," his partner replied. "Do you think we need a bigger truck?"

Elder Oaks quipped, "We don't need a bigger truckload of information, either... Available information wisely used is far more valuable than multiplied information allowed to lie fallow" (Oaks "Focus" 82-83).

Surely, then, the challenge we have as learners and teachers is pushing ourselves to discern the significance of that which we learn. That discernment, often difficult, is the proof of our understanding. Like Nephi of old who first feasted upon the words of Christ and then likened them to his own experience, we too should move from the mere acquisition of knowledge to this understanding and application. "With all thy getting," the Lord admonishes, "get understanding" (Proverbs 4:7).

With this understanding, we are now in a position to serve—to apply our knowledge of the spiritual and secular to bless the lives of others. I wonder if this in part is what Elder Maxwell meant when he wrote, "For a disciple of Christ, academic scholarship is a form of worship. It is actually another dimension of consecration" (5). Equipped with understanding, we are instruments in God's hands to build his kingdom. Now we better understand, as few people do, "that education is a part of being about our Father's business" (Spencer W. Kimball qtd. in Butler 25). And surely, President Hinckley clarifies, "One does not have to be brilliant to make a difference in this world, to reach out and help and serve and lead others" (*Standing* 62).

4. THE LORD'S PATTERN FOR LEARNING REQUIRES US TO FOCUS ON THAT WHICH MATTERS.

While latter-day prophets have taught that all truth is circumscribed into one great whole and to God all things are spiritual, Elder Maxwell reminds us that "there is no democracy among truths. They are not of equal significance" (3). The "'deep things of God' (1 Corinthians 2:10, 14)... come to us only by revelation from God, and they clearly have a greater significance than other truths and fleeting facts" (4). As Jacob taught, "No man knoweth of [God's] ways save it be revealed unto him" (Jacob 4:8). Again, the Lord's pattern for learning helps us to make necessary distinctions among these truths.

How does He do this? He teaches us individually through the Holy Spirit. And as we depend upon this guidance I think a miracle occurs. Our tutorials in life are tailored to our particular needs—in either spiritual or temporal realms. And we never will lose track of that which matters because the Lord will keep us on a proper course.

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The Lord’s pattern for learning—staying focused on that which matters—is completely dependent then upon our developing spirituality—something we can each do. Spirituality is a talent, taught Elder Bruce R. McConkie: “Above all talents, . . . chief among all endowments—stands the talent for spirituality” (234). This concept should give us great hope. The more we exercise our spirituality, the stronger our spirituality becomes. And the stronger our spirituality, the more we are able to learn, the Lord’s way, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Ultimately, that holy guidance leads us to places we need to be, doing what needs to be done—in our homes, our wards and stakes, our neighborhoods, (for us) our classrooms, and most important of all that guidance leads us to where we are at this moment, seated in the Holy Temple. Here, we learn what Elder Oaks in our most recent General Conference called “the highest priority . . . knowledge” (“Focus” 84). “That knowledge is obtained from the explicit and symbolic teachings of the endowment and from the whisperings of the Spirit that come as we are desirous to seek and receptive to hear the revelation available to us in . . . [this] sacred place” (84).



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Brothers and Sisters, the temple more than any other place I can think of reminds us that learning is our theology and that the Lord has established a pattern for learning. Here we present ourselves before the Lord in meekness and humility, here we learn to discipline ourselves and seek understanding and application of gospel truths, here we focus on what matters most, and here we know through our faith and righteousness that the Holy Spirit will instruct us personally about those concerns most important to us.

I am thankful for the Lord’s pattern of learning. To me it is a great manifestation that each of us matters to Him. ☺

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