

LEARNING TO GATHER ALL THINGS IN ONE

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*In the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him.
(Ephesians 1:10)*

In an *Ensign* article published in 1983, A. LeGrand and Cindy O. Richards spoke about the blessing of learning in the Lord's way. Among other things they pointed out that

Learning by faith calls for an integration of our personal and public lives, our religious and professional pursuits, and also offers us the opportunity to progress from both our everyday and our extraordinary experiences. Applying what the Lord has revealed about learning, it seems entirely possible to transform any or every hour of life into an integral whole, which places the otherwise mundane into the context of the eternal. The challenge given each of us is to find that which God would have us do and then to do it, morally, actively, and knowledgeably—"even by study and also by faith." (14)

It shouldn't come as a surprise to those raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that the Lord's way of learning calls us into the adventure of integrating everything we learn into a perfect whole. We read in the *Doctrine and Covenants* that "all things unto [the Lord] are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal; neither any man, nor the children of men; neither Adam, your father, whom I created" (29:34). This doctrine affirms that the Lord views all things from a spiritual point of view; that He has done so ever since the world was created—and before. Are we, likewise, willing to admit that our ordinary experiences of the day are themselves spiritual? If so, what does this mean?

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Among other things it means that mundane events carry key elements we must study and learn from in order to become like God. In other words, there is much we can learn from the routine of our lives if we are committed to figuring out what spiritual lessons the Lord desires to teach us. To be sensitized to its lessons we must allow the Spirit to wean us from the assumption that our spiritual instruction for the week comes to us mainly on Sunday, or during other "spiritual gatherings." Meetings like these do play an important role in our spiritual development. But in every moment of every day it is possible to discern lessons we must learn—to use our time to glean all we can from all we do. We must value time as a gift from God, viewing it as "the present" through which timely

truths may be revealed to us, or concealed from us—depending upon our desires to inquire or ignore.

What, for instance, can we learn from the way we live with our spouses and children, or from the way we live singly with friends? What can we learn from the way we wait in line at the store, or at a traffic light, or from the dishes we do or don't do. What might we discover from the way we talk on the phone, from our manner of dress, from the way we clean or clutter our rooms? What can we learn from the way we talk with each other, or avoid talking, from the magazines we read, or the music we listen to, or the TV, movies, or videos we view? What truths are hidden in how we study or don't study? In how we prepare to teach or do not? What might the people we associate with tell us about ourselves? What truths are hinted at in the activities we give ourselves to during our so-called "free time"? Many lessons are tucked away in these types of events, people, and preferences we often live with, lessons that reveal us as we are, while hinting at our need for growth "by study and also by faith" (*Doctrine and Covenants* 88:118).

We have heard before that we are not so much human beings having spiritual experiences as we are spiritual beings having human experiences. The Lord informs us through Mormon: "By their works ye shall know them, for if their works be good, then they are good also" (Moroni 7:5). Why, then, are we having these human experiences? Is there a purpose to discerning whether our works are good, even in the routine of our lives? I believe the ultimate reason for having human experience is to learn how to lift every aspect of our lives to the level of nothing less than godliness. That which can't be lifted to this level must be discarded, or it will eventually drag us down into sadness and sorrow. In his preface to *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis spoke of the price we must be willing to pay to avoid such sorrow. He said: "If we insist on keeping Hell (or even earth) we shall not see Heaven: if we accept Heaven we shall not be able to retain even the smallest and most intimate souvenirs of Hell" (ix). Every day we are faced with the opportunity and challenge of choosing the life we desire to live. In that opportunity lies the test of what we truly love. Faithful learning is the process by which we are empowered through study and faith to replace our love of worldly things with a greater love for eternal things. We do this as we learn enough of God and Christ—Their greatness, goodness, and love for us—to want to let go of that which is worldly, in order to embrace that which is eternal.

Letting go of the world to embrace eternity is implied in Moses, where we read, "And they taste the bitter that they might know to prize the good" (Moses 6:55). In this verse, the Lord implies that we must have "world experiences" to turn from, in order to choose Him and His ways. The truth is, as we turn to our Savior, we turn from sin, from

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error—even from the limited and limiting ways of thought that fuel our frustrations, and compound our problems. But in turning to Him, we also gain heightened appreciation for all that is good in the world. In Christ, we are told, it is possible “to lay hold upon every good thing” (Moroni 7:21). Thus by opening ourselves up to the Savior’s tutelage, we learn to turn from the evil in this life in the educated enterprise of uniting all the good we can into a perfected whole. Our pursuits become more divine as we become more refined in all aspects of our lives. In fact, we experience more enjoyments than were ever available to us through sin. These righteous enjoyments become ever more expansive, ever more enriching, ever more desired, until, in the words of Joseph Smith “we have overcome the evils of this life and lost every desire for sin.” Only then, says the Prophet, can we arrive “at that point of faith where [we] are wrapped in the power and glory of [our] Maker and [are] caught up to dwell with Him” (51).

There is a central challenge to be faced when learning this way. This kind of education requires far more than book learning and memorization. To learn, according to the Lord’s law of learning, we must “hearken unto the precepts” we discover (2 Nephi 28:30), then integrate them into our “walk and conversation” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 20:68). Only through a process of diligent study and thoughtful obedience can we learn the principles upon which the celestial kingdom is established. Jesus made this clear when he taught: “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (John 7:17). And the Lord’s instruction to the former saints as to the cause of their afflictions is clear:

Behold, they have not learned to be obedient to the things which I required at their hands... And [they] are not united according to the union required by the law of the celestial kingdom; And Zion cannot be built up unless it is by the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom; otherwise I cannot receive her unto myself. And my people must needs be chastened until they learn obedience, if it must needs be, by the things which they suffer. (*Doctrine and Covenants* 105:3-6)

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Implicit in the Savior’s instruction is this truth: learning what to do and learning what to know are only prerequisites to the next requirement—obeying the principles one has discovered. But obedience isn’t something we simply decide to do—we must *learn* obedience as well. For this reason, laying claim to this kind of education requires more than diligence; it requires patient persistence. For when it comes to the Lord’s law of learning—the law upon which the learning we do must translate into the people we become—the Lord is only marginally interested in our efforts to study true principles or doctrines for the sake of sharing appropriate

answers during gospel discussions. Further, He isn't all that interested in our ability to use true principles solely to make our lives less troubled and more convenient in this world. His central desire for us in all we learn is the development of our character—the changing of our hearts, the transforming of our minds until we become as He is (Mosiah 4:2; 1 Corinthians 2:16). He knows full well the importance of Paul's exhortation for us not to be "conformed to this world." Likewise He understands the need for us to study and obey, that we might "be transformed by the renewing of [our] mind, that [we] may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Romans 12:2). Only through transformation from mortals to immortals; only through the kind of study and faith by which we transcend the boundaries of natural men and women to become "un-natural" or "whole and holy" men and women in Christ, can we exercise a vibrant hope of knowing God and Christ as They really are. In fact, desiring to know our Heavenly Father and our divine Brother this way moves us to study everything else through faith and obedience, changing as we learn. In so doing, one is drawn unto eternal life through the very process of learning to comprehend "all good things" for oneself (John 17:3).

Thus, from sun-up to sun-down Ether proclaimed the need to "believe in God unto repentance," affirming that those who believe in God in this way are able to hope for a better world (Ether 12:3-4). But why this kind of belief? Why is *belief in God unto repentance* the empowering principle in securing hope for a better world? The answer is significant. Only those who believe in God to the degree that they repent or change in conjunction with the truth they study, can understand how much better life can be. Their on-going change affirms eternal possibilities! Their sacrifice of "what is," draws them ever more assuredly to "what may be." On the other hand, those who do not change cannot lay claim to this hope, since the life they know—the life they've seen—is the only life that seems possible to them. Thus Ether may exert all his energy to "prophesy great and marvelous things" to his people, but they do not believe, "because they [see] them not" (Ether 12:5). The majority of Ether's audience cannot imagine the great and marvelous things of Ether's prophecy because they are constrained by their ungodly commitments to see things "as they, themselves are," not as "they really are, or as they may become" (see Jacob 4:13; *Doctrine and Covenants* 5:13; 93:24).

Is it any wonder why we must learn by faith? Faith in Christ is the means by which we are enabled to exercise hope for a better life individually and socially. For this reason faithful learning must include all aspects of our lives to enjoy living in such a glorious community. There isn't any aspect of our life that will not eventually effect us and others for good or for ill. We assert through transcendent doctrine that each

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one of us is going to live forever through the grace of Christ's triumph over death (see *Doctrine and Covenants* 76). That being true, we ought to concern ourselves centrally with the quality of that life, not merely with the perpetuation of life itself. In this vein C.S. Lewis observes,

There are a good many things which would not be worth bothering about if [we] were going to live only seventy years, but which [we] had better bother about seriously if [we are] going to live for ever. Perhaps [our] bad temper or [our] jealousy are gradually getting worse—so gradually that the increase in seventy years will not be very noticeable. But it might be absolute hell in a million years.... (*Mere Christianity* 74)

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This view on eternity helps us understand more clearly why, notwithstanding His depth of love for us—indeed, because of the eternal nature of His love for us, and His yearning to be one with us—why our Father “cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 1:31).

As we learn to know how deeply God desires to be one with us; as our desire to be one with Him is deepened through compassionate study of, and for, Him—we learn to integrate all we have experienced, all we are experiencing, and all we will yet experience, into a perfected whole. This perfection is not only possible; it is the purpose of our earthly existence. But if we are to enjoy perfection, it must be achieved in the Lord's way. That way is through the kind of learning that can be unified and glorified through our faith in Jesus Christ, as we willingly and patiently obey all principles of truth discoverable through diligent study. ∞

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