

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY-IDAHO DEVOTIONAL

Robert M. Wilkes—Interim President

Editor's note: During Brother Wilkes' tenure as Interim President, we are pleased to present his devotional address of 11 January 2005.

My brothers and sisters, I am so glad that Estella included me in her expression of greeting to you. My heart resonates with hers and the things that she told you.

On one occasion President David O. McKay said:

Next to the bestowal of life itself, the right to direct that life is God's greatest gift to man... Freedom of choice is more to be treasured than any possession earth can give. It is inherent in the spirit of man. It is a divine gift to every normal being. Whether born in abject poverty or shackled at birth by inherited riches, everyone has this most precious of all life's endowment—the gift of free agency, man's inherited and inalienable right.

Free agency is the impelling source of the soul's progress. It is the purpose of the Lord that man become like him. In order for man to achieve this it was necessary for the Creator first to make him free. (*Conference Report*, April 1950, pp. 32-33)

It is about this personal freedom that I wish to make comment today. I pray for the Spirit to attend and enable me to speak true doctrine and each of you to understand the same.

I have come to believe that in most cases this matter of freedom is more a case of capacity than of permission. When we are children we obtain our freedoms largely by permission. We ask if we can play. We ask if we can have some ice cream. We ask whatever it is that we might want to do. And if permission is granted, we then feel free. But as we grow older, permission seems to be less and less the instrument of freedom.

I will use an example familiar to many of us, and then I will leave it to you to generalize this very narrow example to the larger experiences of life. When I was a little boy, like many of you, my parents arranged for me to have the opportunity to take piano lessons. It was an opportunity I did not wish to have. I felt, in that period of my life, to do so would be a great impingement on my freedom. I did not want to practice. I did not want to take the lessons. And I suppose I was not a very good boy. I fussed about it so much that finally my parents relented, and I did not take piano lessons. I felt liberated. I felt victorious. I felt that I had asserted my agency and my independence.

I did not think a lot more about it until one day many years later when I, as a man, sat in a stake priesthood meeting. On this particular

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occasion, a woman had been invited to sing a special musical number to the priesthood. She was a lovely lady and had a very beautiful voice. She presented herself in the meeting at the appropriate time. But as she came to the front of the chapel, it was clear that her accompanist had not arrived. She, not becoming frustrated, simply looked around. As she did so, she identified in the very back of the room a man, a faculty member at Ricks College. She said to him, “Chester, would you please come and accompany me?” At the invitation, this great soul rose from his chair and walked to the front. She handed him the piece of music, and he sat at the piano. He accompanied her to seeming perfection and added much to the song she sang.

As I watched that happen, my mind went back to the time of my opportunity to learn to play the piano—the one I did not take. The thought occurred to me, “What if this woman would have said, ‘Bob, will you accompany me?’” I could have only had one response: “I am sorry, but I do not know how to play the piano and, therefore, I have no choice to make and, therefore, I have not freedom in the matter.” My failure to endure the process of creating a choice as it related to playing the piano had left me without capacity and, therefore, in bondage to my own inadequacies. Armed guards could not have denied me any more effectively. In that instance I was free to do nothing.

I suggest that the freedom to do nothing is actually the greatest of captivities. And so, the issue really becomes whether we are talking about the freedom from things or the freedom to do things. My main interest as a child dealing with parents who wished me to learn to play the piano was that I wanted to be free from all of the implications of learning to play the piano. As I said, those implications seemed burdensome to me. I was not wise enough to understand that those burdens would actually transform themselves into a great gift and a great joy and a great vehicle of service.

Both the freedom from and the freedom to do are important elements of the full life. There certainly are things one would strive to be free from. I want to be very clear about that, even though there is no need to identify all or any of them here at this particular time. There are also arduous, challenging, and difficult things that we must do in order to acquire capacity. One who is wise might be willing, in order to be free, to subject himself or herself to those things. The scriptures can help us understand this concept. I read from the second chapter of 2 Nephi beginning in verse 15:

And to bring about his eternal purposes in the end of man, after he had created our first parents, ...it must needs be that there was an opposition; even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; ...

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Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself...

Parenthetically, it sounds as if He gave to man that man could do things, could be free to do things. Continuing the quote:

...[he] gave unto man that he should act for himself. Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other.
(2 Nephi 2:15-16)

I take that to mean that only with choice can there be freedom. We are not free by entitlement but by the availability of choices. And the truth of the matter is, ultimately, we create most of the choices that make us free.

This seems particularly meaningful to me today in this setting, with you, at the beginning of a semester. You will all face the issues of arduous and challenging and sometimes burdensome requirements that will be placed upon you in various settings and in connection with courses and activities in which you will be involved. A great point of sadness might well be if one were to squander the moment and leave here with little capacity to do things—left only with the temporarily sweet but souring memory of not having had to conquer obstacles. There is a moment of opportunity that comes in our lives, and it is within the framework of your time here and at other places where you might be schooled that a significant amount of your life’s choices will be established. I hope and pray and trust that you will be what I think you are: wise, prudent, and careful stewards of this moment that the Lord has made available to you.

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From verse 22 of that same chapter, I continue the quote:

And now, behold, if Adam had not transgressed he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the garden of Eden...

“Hurray! Hurray!” some would say. “That would be wonderful! There would be no death. There would be no illness. There would be no war. There would be no worry.” And somehow they stop short of saying, “And there would be no freedom.” The Lord said it for us:

...And all things which were created must have remained in the same state in which they were after they were created; and they must have remained forever, and had no end [in the state in which they were created]. (2 Nephi 2:22)

Nothing would have changed for Adam and Eve. There would have been no growth. The expectation and desire of the Lord that they would become more and more like Him would have been frustrated.

And they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin. (2 Nephi 2:23)

Free from everything. Free to do nothing.

Some have erroneously concluded that the Lord gave conflicting commandments to Adam and Eve—that he said, “Do not eat the fruit, and yet multiply and replenish the earth.” In fact, Heavenly Father was simply setting the stage for Adam and Eve to act for themselves—to be free to do, to be free to choose. It was clear in their minds, as we learn in other places, which choice would please the Lord the most.

President Joseph Fielding Smith said:

Now this is the way I interpret that [account of Adam and Eve in the Garden]. The Lord said to Adam, here is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you want to stay here then you cannot eat of that fruit. If you want to stay here then I forbid you to eat it. But you may act for yourself and you may eat of it if you want to. And if you eat it you will die. (Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson, (eds.), *Studies in Scripture, Volume Two, The Pearl of Great Price*, Randall Book Co., Salt Lake City, Utah, 1985, p. 93)

That is, you will die in the sense of being cast out of the garden. In that case, you will be free to do things—to have children, to have joy, to have misery, to do good, to know sin. But that condition had to come upon Adam and Eve by way of their choosing rather than by way of imposition from the Lord. If you do not partake, you can stay in the Garden and be free from everything—including piano lessons. If you do partake, you will be cast out and be free to create choices.

I would reiterate that you now find yourself in perhaps one of the most fertile, productive times of your life for creating choices. As you grow older, as you marry, as family comes along, you will find increasingly the energies of your mind and soul will be absorbed with the necessities of life. Saying this, I realize that many of you already work jobs—some, more than one job. Many of you are carrying tremendous loads. Yet, in spite of all of that, there may never be a better time for you to create choices which, in reality, become the foundation of our personal freedom. When one is engaged in the enabling process of education, there must be commitment to subject oneself to the tough choices and discipline that in the end create capacity and opportunity.

As I think about how easy it is to treasure up and cling to the freedoms, the privileges and ease of way that we value, I am reminded of a statement that General Dwight D. Eisenhower made on one occasion. Said he, “A people that values its privileges above its principles soon loses both” (Davis Newton Lott, *The Presidents Speak*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1994, p. 306).

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May I share one other thought about freedom. As I have observed the happenings of the world, particularly the happenings within the Church, over my lifetime, it has become rather apparent to me that a freedom to be greatly treasured is the freedom to rejoice when it is time to rejoice.

You all remember the account in the fourth chapter of 2 Nephi when Lehi dies. As his son Nephi goes through the terrible anguish and pain of losing his father (and he makes it clear in that chapter that he did go through such things), there comes a point when Nephi said, “. . . when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins; . . .” (2 Nephi 4:19). I do not know of anything sadder than a moment intended for rejoicing that is robbed of that by poor decisions and poor choices.

Some years ago during a beautiful early fall evening, a young woman sat on a stone bench down by the Spori Building. At that time it was the original Spori Building. And as this young woman and a friend sat there talking and enjoying one another’s company (they had been dating for some time), the young man brought himself to the point of saying to this young woman, “I have kept myself worthy my whole life so that I could ask a girl like you to be my wife.” He reached into his pocket and took out a ring, attempting to place it on her finger. At that moment, she became distraught. She jumped up, placing the ring that he had tried to put on her finger on the bench, and left him there. She anguished about that for days and finally did what we would understand to be the proper thing to do. She went to her bishop and began the repentance process. It is what she said to her bishop that I think is compelling: “What I could not bear to tell him is that I was not the girl he thought I was. But I wish to be.” A moment intended to be one of rejoicing had been robbed of its joy. She had wished at that point, more than anything else, to let the ring be placed on her finger. To her credit she had too much integrity to do that. It certainly was a moment where she desired to rejoice, but her heart groaned because of her past choices and decisions.

Conversely, I will tell you a brief story of a young man returning from a mission honorably served. He arrived at the airport and made his way to the baggage area where his family and friends were waiting. Upon seeing them, all of the decisions, all of the hard work, all of the sacrifice, all of the disciplining, all of the obedience demonstrated during his mission came to bear in a reunion most joyful. One of the singular moments in life when one ought to be able to rejoice is when returning from honorable service in the mission field. Whether the missionary returns to one who cares or a throng who cares is not the issue. The issue is that he/she returns, able to rejoice, because of the decisions he/she has made.

At times I think we worry overly much about what is required of us that seems to constrict us—the Honor Code, speed limits, and curfews—thinking, perhaps, that every requirement or expectation not

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of our liking constitutes a trespass on our agency and our freedom. In order to be truly happy in making our way through life, we will need to see the vicissitudes of the mortal journey as essential elements in the equations of choice and freedom. To do so will enable us to turn them to our advantage as opposed to letting them embitter and discourage us.

The Prophet Joseph taught:

I, like Paul, have been in perils, and oftener than anyone in this generation... I should be like a fish out of water, if I were out of persecutions. The Lord has constituted me so curiously that I glory in persecution... If they want a beardless boy to whip all the world, I will get on the top of a mountain and crow like a rooster: I shall always beat them. (B. H. Roberts, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Volume VI, Deseret Book Company, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1962, p. 408)

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That attitude about difficult, challenging processes of life that ultimately create choice and freedom is the ideal. In the 122 section of the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph is assured that, "...all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good" (verse 7).

To experience life at its fullest is then to create choices, add capacity, and increasingly become free to do things. That it may be so for each of us, I humbly pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ☺