The Value of a Journey Through the Wilderness

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During May and June of 1834 Joseph led a group of over 200 men, 10 women and several children known as Zion’s Camp from Kirtland, Ohio, to Clay County, Missouri, in an unsuccessful attempt to regain land from which the Saints in Missouri had been expelled.

David F. Boone, who wrote Zion’s Camp: A Study in Obedience, Then and Now, wrote, “Clay County Missouri was over 800 miles from Kirtland. The camp members’ hardships were severe: hunger, thirst, unseasonable cold, disease, milk sickness [also known as tremetol vomiting – it is a kind of poisoning, characterized by trembling, vomiting, and severe intestinal pain, that affects individuals who ingest milk and other dairy products or meat from a cow that has fed on white snakeroot plant which contains the poison] and inadequate dress, or clothing – all combined to create great suffering.” Boone goes on to write that Joseph Smith, “Impressed upon them [Zion’s Camp] the necessity of being humble, exercising faith and patience and living in obedience to the commands of the Almighty, and not murmur at the dispensations of Providence. He bore testimony of the truth of the work which God had revealed through him and promised the brethren that if they would live as they should, before the Lord, keeping His commandments…they should all safely return. Repeatedly through the march, the Prophet had to warn, exhort, reprimand, and encourage the participants to greater faithfulness. He reminded them of their duty; he encouraged their obedience and chastised them for their laxness toward keeping the commandments. Some camp members complained about the lack of bread at mealtime, about the butter, the meat, the horses (or lack of them), about the company they were forced to keep, and about almost every other imaginable problem. Others endured every privation, every setback, every challenge and opportunity with self-respect and fortitude.”

The Zion’s camp effort sounds a lot like Lehi’s and Nephi’s experience with Laman and Lemuel, only Nephi had to deal with it a lot longer.

It is interesting to note that nine of the original twelve apostles of this dispensation had served faithfully during the trek of Zion’s Camp. So, in a real way, the purpose of Zion’s Camp was for those who marched to prove their
obedience to the Prophet, their willingness to sacrifice, and their ability to deal with physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual challenges without complaining or murmuring.

An interesting statement in the October 1976 General Conference by Elder Neal A. Maxwell supports this thought about the purpose of Zion’s Camp: “God is more concerned with growth than with geography. Thus, those who marched in Zion’s Camp were not exploring the Missouri countryside, but their own possibilities.”

A similar statement could be said about Lehi and his family. Although I am sure they got to know the Red Sea Wilderness that they traveled through for eight years, those who were obedient and followed the counsel of their prophet were able to discover their own possibilities. They too suffered hunger, emotional, spiritual, and physical hardships. They too had their share of setbacks, challenges, loss of faith, and, of course, murmuring and even physical attacks. Like Nephi breaking his bow. Have you ever wondered why Laman and Lemuel couldn’t go out and make their own bows?

Elder Boyd K. Packer wrote in his book That All May Be Edified, “It was meant to be that life would be a challenge. To suffer some anxiety, some depression, some disappointment, even some failure is normal. Teach our members that if they have a good, miserable day once in a while, or several in a row, to stand and face them. Things will straighten out. There is a great purpose in our struggle in life.” It seems that many in our society and many of our students at BYU-Idaho have allowed themselves to suffer anxiety and depression so long that it becomes a medical situation and often a reason for failure. Perhaps the admonition Elder Packer presents to us all to face our challenges, knowing that things will work out and realizing there is greater purpose to our struggles, will help us be stronger in facing these challenges with faith and determination rather than with medication.

Willi Unsoeld, the famous American mountaineer, along with his partner Tom Hornbein, put up a new route on the West Ridge of Mt. Everest in 1963, becoming the 13th and 14th men to reach the mountain summit. They made the following statements about the benefits—or we could say blessings—of taking on challenges:

“Hunger, thirst, cold, fatigue, your own physical and mental limitations—you will feel all of these. This teaches you about nature. More than that, you come face-to-face with yourself. Your mind and your body can take more than you think. Don’t cheat yourself by giving up—in mountaineering, or in life. You can learn by being terrific. By meeting a challenge and not giving up, you work through your fears. This builds a confidence that will stick with you throughout your life. Once committed, be confident and stick with your course. There comes a time when you have to take a leap of faith.”

Do we, as teachers at BYU-Idaho, encourage our students to take that leap of faith? Do we challenge them to explore their own possibilities? Do we strive to empower our students? Do we instill in them that faith like Nephi had when he was “lead by the spirit not knowing beforehand the things which [he] should do”? Or, do we always provide some kind of perfect rubric for them to follow so they know what is next to guarantee their success?

One of Willi Unsoeld’s friends, Dick Emerson, wrote about his experiences with Willi on Everest: “Willi required that I cope with the mountain and with him until we both grew weary and fatigued; with that special form of fatigue which testifies to added strength.” Please share that thought with your students. You do not experience fatigue that testifies of added strength by playing video games all night. One must earn that kind of fatigue.

The saints who remained steadfast in Zion’s Camp and in the wilderness with Nephi were a different sort of people. They were committed. They were confident. They
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dealt positively with disappointment and misery. How many of us would have made it? How many of our students would have made it without complaining, murmuring, and wishing they hadn’t taken on the challenge?

Prior to Ernest Shackleton’s 1914 Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, which involved crossing the Antarctic continent on foot and dog sled, he placed an ad in a London newspaper to recruit men like Nephi, Willi, Joseph and those on Zion’s Camp. It read, “MEN WANTED FOR HAZARDOUS JOURNEY, SMALL WAGES, BITTER COLD, LONG MONTHS OF COMPLETE DARKNESS, CONSTANT DANGER. SAFE RETURN DOUBTFUL, HONOR AND RECOGNITION IN CASE OF SUCCESS.” Would you have responded to that ad? Would your students? People like Nephi, Willi, and Joseph would have. In fact, Shackleton had over 5000 applicants, of which 24 were chosen. What if a similar ad came out in the Scroll? How many responses do you think there would be?

In 1981, Greg Child, an aspiring high altitude mountaineer, was climbing a Himalayan peak named Shivling. This peak is 21,467 feet high—not too high compared to some of the other Himalayan giants, but if you looked at a picture of it, you would see why it is a worthy challenge. He was climbing with famed British mountaineer, Doug Scott. Child writes, “Doug Scott and I were huddled in a rocky corner at 20,000 feet, sheltering from the wind and the falling ice that our two companions above were dislodging. We’d been climbing for twelve days, our food and fuel were finished and the weather was deteriorating. It was my first Himalayan climb, Doug’s umpteenth. I began to whine about my hunger and the cold. ‘You’ll never find enlightenment on a full stomach,’ Doug merely said; then he swung onto the rope and headed up the wall.” Who would be Nephi and who would be Laman in this example?

Walter Bonatti, an Italian mountaineer, wrote this statement about the effort required for mountaineering:

“Real mountaineering is above all a reason for struggle and for self-conquest, for spiritual tempering and enjoyment in the ideal and magnificent surroundings of the mountains. The trials, the hardships, the privations with which an ascent of the peaks is always studded, become, for that very reason, valid tests which the mountaineer accepts to temper his powers and character. In the atmosphere of struggle, of close relationships with the unforeseen difficulties and the thousand perils of the mountains, the alpinist is shown in his true colors, ruthlessly laid bare, both in his qualities and in his defects, to himself and to others.”

When something like steel is tempered, it’s heated to a high degree and then cooled to increase its strength. So, this “spiritual tempering” Bonatti is referring to makes one stronger in character.

Could we reword Bonatti’s statement to make it more applicable to our students here at BYU-I?

“A real BYU-I education is, above all, a reason for struggle and self-conquest, for spiritual tempering and enjoyment in the ideal and magnificent surroundings of this school. The trials, the hardships, the privations with which a college education is always studded become, for that very reason, valid tests which the student accepts to temper their own powers and their own character. In the atmosphere of struggle, of close relationships with the unforeseen difficulties and the thousand perils of getting a college education, the student is shown in their true colors, ruthlessly laid bare, both in their qualities and in their defects, to themselves and to others.”

Could there be an attitude or philosophy here at BYU-I that students should not be expected or tempted to jump out of the boat?
Back in the early 2000’s, I attended one of President Bednar’s Q&A meetings. There, I brought up the point that many students don’t participate in class because they fear being judged by other students. I asked President Bednar if he had any suggestions. He turned my question over to one of his vice presidents who suggested that I should give my students my email so they could send their opinions or thoughts to me without the fear of fellow students judging them. I was shocked. It was almost as if he was saying the opposite of what Walter Bonatti had stated about being “ruthlessly laid bare in his qualities and his defects to himself and to others.” To me, he was saying to protect our students and take away any chance of hurt feelings, embarrassment, or worse yet, challenges from other students.

In January 2016, Elder and Sister Bednar spoke at our Tuesday devotional. Sister Bednar’s talk was titled, “Jump Out of the Boat.” I find it interesting that her talk was given after both the 2015 April and October General Conferences when Elder Ballard told us all to “Hold on and stay in the boat!” Thankfully, they were speaking of different kinds of boats. Sister Bednar’s talk was based on the story of Peter jumping out of the boat and walking toward the Savior on the water. She said, “I pray the Spirit will strengthen our desire to have the faith to get out of the boat and keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.” She spoke of the value of extending ourselves beyond our comfort zones and gave examples from her life when her comfort zone was extended when she jumped out of the boat. She concluded her talk by saying, “I pray that as you have the opportunities to be stretched emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually, you will not hesitate to demonstrate your faith and ‘jump out of the boat.’”

Could there be an attitude or philosophy here at BYU-I that students should not be expected or tempted to jump out of the boat? Is there a belief that their potential can be discovered by not jumping into the unknown, but by surrounding themselves with familiarity? Too many of us choose to dock our boats or ships in safe harbors, but that is not what ships are for. It seems like our “ship of curious workmanship” to which BYU Idaho has been compared is not meant to even float for fear of a student jumping off. There are those who put barriers around the decks of our ships to ensure that no one can choose to jump, or they figuratively take students only in non-challenging, ankle-deep water. A great quote by Mark Twain supports Sister Bednar’s admonition to jump out of the boat: “Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So, throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.”

Maybe our students and indeed ourselves need to wander in the wilderness for an extended time and suffer much affliction, hunger, thirst and fatigue. Like Elder Packer said, we may need “several miserable days in a row.” We should remember what all that wandering in the wilderness did for Nephi and his family. “And so great were the blessings of the Lord upon us, that while we did live on raw meat in the wilderness, our women did give plenty of suck for their children and were strong, yea, even like unto the men; and they did bear their journeyings without murmuring … And thus we see that the commandments of God must be fulfilled. And if it so be that the children of men keep the commandments of God he doth nourish them, and strengthen them, and provide means whereby they can accomplish the thing which he has commanded them; wherefore, he did provide means for us while we did sojourn in the wilderness.”

It is my hope and my challenge that we as teachers and leaders here at BYU-Idaho will be willing to provide our students and ourselves opportunities to be challenged not just academically but emotionally, physically, and spiritually. We all have what it takes to “jump out of the boat” and discover for ourselves our own possibilities.