

Cultivating Godliness in Mortality

RACHEL L. WADHAM

When I was a child, one of the books that my younger sister and I loved was called *The Judge: An Untrue Tale*, by Harve Zemach and illustrated by Margot Zemach. My sister discovered it one day because it was easy to find at the end of the picture-book stacks in the Z's, and after that it came home with us from the library quite often. In fact, my sister can still quote it in full to this day. As the title suggests, this is a book about a judge. Sitting at his bench, the judge presides over the court as prisoners are brought in one by one. Each prisoner has the same story: a large scary beast is coming! The prisoners keep repeating the same information:

*A horrible thing is coming this way,
Creeping closer day by day.
Its eyes are scary
Its tail is hairy
Its paws have claws
It snaps its jaws*

*It growls, it groans
It chews up stones
It spreads its wings
And does bad things
I tell you, Judge, we all better pray!¹*

Each time the judge pompously dismisses their concerns and promptly sends them off to jail. Now forgive me for these spoilers and the raw content, but the story ends with the judge, satisfied with a good day's work, beginning to leave. Suddenly the exact beast that the prisoners had described breaks into the courtroom and promptly eats him whole, which allows all the prisoners to be set free. This book is exceptional, with rich, detailed illustrations and a perfect rhyme scheme. But as an adult, I have come to see a unique theme offered in this story—one that resonates with me as a librarian. Today I contend that *The Judge* is all about information literacy and that if the judge had been more literate, the ending might have been very different.

Rachel L. Wadham, senior librarian at the BYU Harold B. Lee Library, delivered this devotional address on June 28, 2022.

Throughout the story, the judge got a lot of information, but he clearly did not have the critical ability to evaluate and effectively use this information. He didn't ask questions, and he didn't send the police out to investigate. Also, as the pictures in the book make very clear, if he had just looked out the window, he could have learned quite a lot. Our doomed judge had a lot of information coming at him, and his failure was that he did not validate that information to make informed decisions.

One characteristic of our digital world is that we are also bombarded with information. It comes at us constantly through a wide range of mediums. Learning from our judge's dire outcome, we can focus on being better than he was as we navigate the massive flow of information that comes at us each day. While our information literacy skills may not save us from a situation as dire as that encountered by our judge, I contend that information literacy skills can help us navigate our world in ways that can make us better human beings and better Saints.

One of my jobs as a librarian is to make sure that people know how to identify, use, create, and evaluate all kinds of information. This means that it's my job to help guide and support people as they develop information literacy. Librarians teach classes and consult with students, faculty, and staff to help them navigate the information they use in all their learning and teaching. The import and scope of all the skills that encompass information literacy are too complex to address today, but if you want to know more, come in and see us at the Harold B. Lee Library and we will be happy to help you develop the skills you need for your project or discipline. If you are not part of our direct campus community, then please seek out your own local librarian and they will certainly be happy to help you.

Because I can't cover everything, I would like to address three general skills that, if cultivated, can help us all improve our information literacy. I use the word *cultivate* purposely, since it recalls the context of agriculture, of sowing seeds and tending them carefully as they grow. As with plants growing in a beautiful, bounteous garden, these skills do not develop immediately. They can only

be developed through diligent, careful practice and nurturing; thus they must be cultivated. In my life, I have learned that cultivating a range of values and skills, including the three I will address, helps us navigate the complexities of our mortality, but these skills are also significant for us as we look toward our eternal futures. I know that if we want to cultivate the abilities we will need as gods and goddesses in our eternal lives, we must begin that development here in mortality. As Eliza R. Snow noted in 1869:

We have been instructed that each one of us . . . is endowed with the germs of every faculty requisite to constitute a god or a goddess. . . . Little ones in their mothers' arms have the germs of all the capabilities which we exhibit, and what constitutes the difference between them and ourselves? Merely a lack of development in them, and this development requires cultivation, energy, and perseverance.²

So today I would like to offer some thoughts on cultivating three faculties that will help us cultivate godliness in mortality: wisdom, curiosity, and patience.

Wisdom

Throughout the scriptures there are references to wisdom. I am sure we are all familiar with several classic references, including James 1:5: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God" and also Doctrine and Covenants 88:118: "Teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith." A lesser-known scripture that is one of my personal favorites is Doctrine and Covenants 6:7: "Seek not for riches but for wisdom, and behold, the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto you, and then shall you be made rich. Behold, he that hath eternal life is rich."

So it is clear that wisdom is important here and for the eternities, but what exactly is wisdom? It seems that most often we consider wisdom to be the intellectual aspect of how much knowledge we have. We might be wise if we are well educated or have a lot of experience in a certain domain. But in my studies, I have found that wisdom goes well

beyond the ability to store lots of information in your brain. If we look to the conception of wisdom in ancient Greek Hellenistic philosophy, we see that the word *wisdom* carries a sense of cleverness or skill. This understanding implies that wisdom is not just held but is applied in action through our skill. Looking further into the Hebrew conception of wisdom, we also see a sense of action, for this tradition broadly defines wisdom as the ability to successfully plan and to achieve the desired results from that plan. In this tradition, wisdom is also centered in the heart, which gives us the capacity to make moral decisions. We also see this conception of wisdom in the heart expressed in Psalm 90:12: “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.”

Lastly, we can also see that wisdom is directly connected to our relationship with God. The Guide to the Scriptures states that wisdom is

*the ability or gift from God to judge correctly. A person gains wisdom through experience and study and by following God's counsel. Without God's help, man does not have true wisdom.*³

Wisdom then engages the idea of skills put into an action that is centered in the heart and is given as a gift from God. Seeing wisdom in this way shows its inherent complexity, which is summed up for me in some instruction that was given in the *Relief Society Magazine* in 1967:

*What then is wisdom? Is it knowledge? Yes, but more than knowledge. Is it experience? Yes, but more than experience. Is it insight? Yes, but more than insight. It is knowledge, experience, and insight combined, anchored in faith, and enlightened by inspiration. At least this is wisdom at its highest. [But] most of us must be content with only a partial wisdom, because we have only a fragmentary knowledge, a limited experience, an incomplete insight, and a developing faith. However, like faith, wisdom can grow as we enrich our learning, broaden our experience, and draw closer to God in righteous living.*⁴

The skills of wisdom—including knowledge, experience, insight, and inspiration—can help us face the complexity of the world we live in.

These skills are even more crucial because, given the conditions of mortality, we only have a fragmentary knowledge that is continually growing. Cultivating wisdom allows us to enrich and broaden our understanding of so many topics—from biology to religion. But one of the challenges with cultivating wisdom is that it is not easily done—it takes a lot of work and time. When I think of the time and effort it takes to build wisdom, I often think of strong women such as Esther, who is a biblical example of cultivating wisdom through effort and time. I highly doubt that women such as Esther, Ruth, or even Mother Teresa woke up one morning with the full understanding of how to save a nation, protect a family, or bless the world. Each of these women spent years learning, growing, and cultivating a relationship with God. Each worked to get her heart in just the right place to accomplish her mission with wisdom.

It is important to give ourselves a little grace and recognize that we may not be wise now—nor will we be wise in all situations or at every moment. The point is to cultivate wisdom over time. So how do you do that in your life? Well, the answer to that question is personal and will not be the same for everyone. But for me, one of the ways I have learned some wisdom is through the examples of others.

Like many of you, I have found that two of the wisest people in my life were my parents. My father, Rex, and my mother, Sherry, both worked diligently to cultivate wisdom in many different ways, and their efforts show a range of paths we could each take. Both of my parents studied and learned through the paths of traditional higher education. Both were extensive readers. In fact, one of my favorite memories of my dad was watching him sit on the couch at my grandparents' house and read the newspaper. Both of my parents developed talents in artistic endeavors. My mother was an accomplished musician who played the organ in church from age eleven. And both of my parents drew close to God in righteous living. They made and kept sacred covenants that bound them together, even when they were separated by death for more than thirty years. It is in this that I see their greatest wisdom.

Because their hearts were close to God, my parents were able to see and interpret the information they were given by the Holy Spirit and by their fellow human beings, and this allowed them to interact with the world around them with true empathy. Everyone was welcome at our table, and no one was excluded as part of our family. My parents' hearts, full of wisdom, allowed them to embrace everyone as a child of God. They were such strong exemplars. I strive to be just as wise as my parents so that I can understand the information God sends to me through the Spirit about my mission and purpose here on earth. With this information, I can wisely interact with everyone and take the additional information they give me to help support and love them as they engage in their own mortal journeys.

Curiosity

One of the biggest compliments I have ever received was when a friend noted that I was one of the most curious people she knew. I am curious, and it is a quality that I value. As with wisdom, I first learned curiosity from my parents. They valued curiosity in our home. If I showed an interest in calligraphy, a calligraphy set would appear for me to use. When my sister and I exhibited a love for opera, we studied one composition deeply. Our family then dressed up, our parents took us out of school for the day, and together we attended that production. My dad was one of the most curious people I have known. He explored everything from Hebrew rituals to oil painting. His office was filled to the brim with an ever-expanding collection of books and papers. My mother loved reading magazines and watching history and documentary series. This heritage of exploration was ingrained in me from birth, and I have always been grateful to have a sense of curiosity about the world.

Through one of my recent projects in the library, I have come to love and admire another woman who had a great curiosity for the world: Alice Louise Reynolds, who was a professor of English, the first female faculty member at Brigham Young Academy, and the second woman in Utah to be named a full professor. She had three bachelor's degrees and did advanced study at Cornell, Berkeley, and Columbia. She made four

extensive trips to Europe and wrote for the *Relief Society Magazine* and the *Young Woman's Journal* about her trips. She was also extremely well read and was one of the main drivers for developing the library that would become the Harold B. Lee Library. And she did most of this before women even had the right to vote!

One thing that is clear about Alice Louise is that she used her natural curiosity to explore, investigate, and observe the world around her. In fact, one thing I have learned from her is that curiosity leads us, as humans, to make choices that shape the direction of our lives. Alice Louise loved books and history, and her choices led her to pursue higher education, travel to foreign lands, and expand libraries.

We can follow in Alice Louise's footsteps and let our natural curiosity shape our lives. We might be curious about the natural world and find that that curiosity leads us to major in biology. Or I might be curious about how the new superheroes in the latest Marvel movies might be integrated into Phase Four, and this might lead me into a deep dive on Reddit. I often tell my children's literature students that one mark of a good book is that it makes us want to know more. When we read a great book and it makes us curious to find other books like it or connected to it, then we know that the author has done something really good.

The world is ours to explore, investigate, and observe, and a sense of curiosity leads us to that learning. As Elder Vaiangina Sikahema noted:

*The Lord teaches us individually according to our capacity to learn and how we learn. Our growth is dependent on our willingness, natural curiosity, level of faith, and understanding.*⁵

Despite the negativity the old adage teaches us—that curiosity does things like kill cats—I think that natural curiosity is essential. Elder Robert D. Hales agreed when he said:

Creative people must have a constant curiosity. They should be constantly observing and listening to new ideas. They should be willing to admit that someone else's solution might be better. And they should learn

*the lessons provided by previous experience—both their own and others’.*⁶

One of the downsides of our information age is that much of our information landscape is contentious and contradictory. In the news, on social media, and in our interpersonal interactions, we constantly encounter situations in which individuals cannot accept others’ experiences or see the truths that they offer. While it is certainly not a complete solution, I know that natural curiosity could go a long way toward building bridges of understanding and compassion. Curiosity urges us to ask questions, seek answers from a range of resources and perspectives, critically evaluate our experiences, and synthesize all the information into a new understanding. These skills allow us to open our thoughts and experiences to new ways of thinking. Curiosity can get us thinking, but for curiosity to work, we then need to apply our wisdom. It is the application of wisdom that can turn our thoughts into behaviors that are consistent with the expectations we should have for ourselves as disciples of Christ.

I love learning about people from the past and present—that is my natural curiosity—but it is my wisdom, given as a gift from God, that allows me to judge my own behavior correctly and to make sure that I interact with those around me in completely inclusive and loving ways. For me, it is wisdom and curiosity together that make me a better person and a better Saint, and hopefully these traits will transform me into someone fit to return to my heavenly parents and become a goddess one day.

Patience

Now it may seem that I have conquered all my shortcomings and that I have reached a level of perfection in my wisdom and curiosity. But let me assure you, that is not the case. I still have a long way to go, and that is where my last point comes in: patience. I take to heart the counsel offered in Doctrine and Covenants 67:13: “Continue in patience until ye are perfected.”

When we discuss the virtue of patience, we often connect it to the power to face trials and tribulations. I can attest to the fact that patience is much needed under these conditions. In fact,

I have seen that a lot lately as I have recently faced down a lot of anxiety, depression, and grief that is not going away quickly. I have needed lots of patience to tackle the complexities I have been facing. But patience is not just for trials; it is also connected to our mortal development in broader ways.

In a 1963 visiting teaching (or what you might know as ministering) message in the *Relief Society Magazine*, Sister Christine H. Robinson outlined some qualities of patience that included “gentleness, calmness, self-control, [and] long-suffering.”⁷ Sister Robinson also included a few quotes from others: “Patience . . . strengthens the spirit, sweetens the temper, stifles anger, extinguishes envy, subdues pride, . . . bridles the tongue, [restrains] the hand”⁸ and “Patience . . . ’tis the soul of peace: Of all the virtues ’tis nearest kin to heaven.”⁹

Patience, then, has a lot to do with how we interact with one another. It allows us to work together without anger, envy, or pride. It allows us to be more like our Savior, who was our greatest exemplar of gentle, calm, peaceful, and loving patience. But patience is more than social grace. There is also an important part of patience when it comes to learning and growing that I term “intellectual patience.” Sister Sharon Eubank described the context for this kind of patience in a recent talk:

*For those seeking truth, it may seem at first to be the foolish claustrophobia of windows made of stone. But with patience and faithful questions, Jesus can transform our windows of stone to glass and light. Christ is light to see.*¹⁰

As we apply our curiosity to all the questions we have, this kind of patience allows us to understand that not all answers are forthcoming or easily accessible. We must work diligently but also allow ourselves the time, space, and patience to seek answers. The hymn “Come, Let Us Anew” speaks of “the patience of hope,”¹¹ which for me perfectly describes intellectual patience. The *Preach My Gospel* manual tells us:

Hope is an abiding trust that the Lord will fulfill His promises to you. It is manifest in confidence, optimism,

enthusiasm, and patient perseverance. It is believing and expecting that something will occur. . . .

. . . Patience is related to hope and faith—you must wait for the Lord’s promised blessings to be fulfilled.¹²

Cultivating wisdom and curiosity surely come with the calm acceptance of the Lord’s timing combined with optimistic and enthusiastic perseverance. I have had many experiences in my life that have allowed me to practice the patience of hope. Generally I have lots of questions, both secular and religious. That is one of the reasons I became a librarian. A story is often told of me at a young age telling a family friend that my dream job was to sit in the top of a really big building in a comfy chair behind a mahogany desk. I would be surrounded by books, and people would come and ask me questions, and I would answer them. I have found my dream job because I just love questions. I love answering them, but I also love asking them. I am always the one who wants to know more, and the number of questions I have just keeps growing.

Now let me assure you that I am still working to find suitable answers for the majority of these questions, but the patience of hope allows me to continue in faith despite the confusions inherent in our limited views and the challenges of a mortal existence. However, there is one area in which I had practiced the patience of hope and was blessed to see actual change as I waited in patience on the Lord’s timing. This came in improving one of my own talents in music.

I have always loved music. I have sung, and I have played various instruments. But I also have a learning disability that impacts a lot of things, including my reading, attention, and spatial awareness. I found early on that these challenges really impacted my ability to read four lines of music at once. While I successfully played one line of music on my oboe throughout high school and most of college, I was never really able to learn to play the piano. That was a great sadness in my life, but, realizing that this particular skill was connected to my disability, I lived my life with the patience of hope that someday I would be able to have that skill. I really thought that this might be something that I would have to wait for even into the eternities.

However, as an adult, I felt the lack of my piano skill acutely and decided that I would focus some of my time on working to improve it. I was pretty sure that I would never be a virtuoso, but I knew I could at least try to magnify my talent in whatever way I was physically able. I figured that if I did not become angry or frustrated, then I could work through the trials and maybe gain just a little proficiency. So I began to practice.

The amazing thing was that I had improved because of a connection I had never expected. This was because I had waited on the Lord’s time, and He had guided me in the intervening years to take up tap dancing. Little did I know that the hand-eye coordination I had developed in tap dancing would connect to my piano playing in very fundamental ways. The Lord had opened a way to help me fulfill the blessings of my musical talent. Now I am still not a virtuoso, but I can play the piano and organ in my home and in church.

I am so grateful for the blessings that came into my life because of the patience of hope. I know that sometimes it just takes a little patience to find exactly where our talents lie. At other times it takes patience to let the Lord fulfill His promises to us by allowing our life experiences to put us in the right place to develop the skills we need to work together for our good. I will say that although patience has never been my strong suit, I have learned that the patience of hope is essential if we are to develop, enlarge, and cultivate the faculties of godliness here in mortality.

In the end, I guess the moral of this talk is that if you cultivate wisdom, curiosity, and patience, you will have important skills that will help you not get eaten by horrible beasts. Well, maybe not that exactly, but I will say that these virtues can help us to better navigate our world. They can help us to be stronger as individuals, but they can also help us to see each other as children of God so we can foster belonging and love. They can also help us navigate our contentious society and find more strength in learning and living the gospel. Ultimately, I know they will help us to develop the capacity to be more like our Savior and to someday return, as the children’s song says, “home [to] that heaven where Father [and Mother are] waiting for me.”¹³ So today I challenge you all to think about

what powers you need to cultivate that will help you right now, tomorrow, and forever. As I have found in my own life, you will be all the better for the effort. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Harve Zemach, *The Judge: An Untrue Tale* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969).
2. Eliza R. Snow, in Salt Lake City Seventeenth Ward, Salt Lake Stake, Relief Society Minutes, vol. 2, 1868–1871, 18 February 1869, 148, Church History Library; quoted in Jennifer Reeder and Kate Holbrook, eds., “Let Us Cultivate Ourselves,” chapter 10 in *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2017), 42.
3. Guide to the Scriptures, s.v. “wisdom,” Church of Jesus Christ.
4. Bruce B. Clark, “Cultural Refinement: ‘Wisdom Teaches Right,’” *Relief Society Magazine*, February 1967, 153.
5. Vaiangina Sikahema, “A House of Sequential Order,” *Liahona*, November 2021.
6. Robert D. Hales, “The Message: Channeling Your Creativity,” *New Era*, February 2004; see also Hales, “The Message: Every Good Gift,” *New Era*, August 1983.
7. Christine H. Robinson, “Visiting Teacher Message: ‘Continue in Patience Until Ye Are Perfected,’” *Relief Society Magazine*, September 1963, 704.
8. George Horne, “Patience Portrayed,” discourse 22 (preached before the University of Oxford, at St. Mary’s, 21 November 1762); in William Jones, ed., *The Works of the Right Reverend George Horne, Late Lord Bishop of Norwich; to Which Are Prefixed Memoirs of His Life, Studies, and Writings, by William Jones, One of His Lordship’s Chaplains, and Long His Most Intimate and Confidential Friend* (London: Printed for F. C. and J. Rivington [and 19 others], 1818), 2:414; see Robinson, “Continue in Patience,” 705.
9. Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, *The Honest Whore, Part 1* (1604), act 5, scene 2; quoted in Robinson, “Continue in Patience,” 705.
10. Sharon Eubank, “Christ: The Light That Shines in Darkness,” *Ensign*, May 2019; emphasis in original.
11. “Come, Let Us Anew,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 217.
12. “How Do I Develop Christlike Attributes?” *PMG*, 2019, 123, 126.
13. “I Lived in Heaven,” *Songbook*, 4.