

# *Your Path of Discipleship*

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**E**ach of us here today has an infinitely unique story. Your path of discipleship involves embracing your imperfect story and sharing who you are in a way that meets the world's great needs.

I am a social worker and a researcher. In those roles, I listen to and support people as they deal with devastating change. Most of my work has been with refugees of diverse backgrounds. Right now, more than one hundred million people are forcibly displaced.<sup>1</sup> This equates to one hundred million individual stories, such as one from a young woman named Daria, a native of Ukraine. After leaving her country, Daria talked about her experience. She said, "I never really thought about refugees before, because it was never something I thought might happen to us. I never imagined I would experience war and find myself in this situation."<sup>2</sup> Forced displacement alters people's stories. It changes opportunities and what people envision for their future.

In my personal life, I have also experienced what felt like disappointing detours. As a young person, I expected my life to proceed in a particular pattern. But by the time I turned twenty-five, after having graduated from BYU with a bachelor's and a master's degree, I found myself living alone in Japan, divorced, and working outside of my chosen field. I also somehow ended up with crispy blonde hair that ensured I stood out in Asia. Though I had a great network of support, I had to reevaluate who I was and how I understood the world. As I biked through narrow, winding neighborhoods on long rides to work, I slowly found a deeper sense of peace. As I was cared for by friends and challenged by intent students, I started to find a new sense of direction.

When our journeys take unexpected turns, we have a chance to reevaluate where and how we fit. Grief can stem from the pain of change as well as from the loss of hopes that were tied to a homeland, a relationship, or an identity. Adjusting

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to a new reality can be especially hard when we falsely believe that only one path involves happiness or that only one path indicates a manifestation of God’s love. God loves us in all the aspects of our stories. Daria and her family will continue to adjust to life in Moldova as they watch what is happening back home. As I have adapted to new life landscapes, seeking and feeling the fruits of God’s love strengthens me.

I believe that loving God can ground us as we face global and personal challenges. And following Christ as His disciples can help us access the transformative power of love and grace.

To consider how our unique journeys can benefit the world around us, I will explore three interrelated components of discipleship:

First, know and value who you are. This is foundational.

Second, learn to see and love others with empathy. This is where we draw on that foundation to build understanding and connections with other people.

And third, choose lifelong service. This choice becomes a manifestation of our discipleship as we build and strengthen the world around us.

### **Know and Value Who You Are**

The path of discipleship starts with knowing and valuing who we are. Knowing ourselves means we are aware of the identities, desires, and experiences that shape us. Valuing ourselves means we strive to accept and appreciate that we are inherently worthy of joy and love.

As a global human family, we are both alike and unique. As a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I learned from a young age that “I am a child of God.”<sup>3</sup> This most central identity<sup>4</sup> is shared with every human being, and it unites us as siblings with equal claim on a God who loves all people. We are also unique in the identities and life circumstances that influence who we are. My characteristics as a white woman in the United States influence my opportunities and how you see me, as do factors such as my social class, ability, sexual orientation, legal status, and family status. Our uniqueness

allows us to learn from and rely on each other (see 1 Corinthians 12:12–27). Consider the uniqueness of “the lilies of the field” (Matthew 6:28). The lilies grow toward the sun without shame at their beauty and without envy for the other gorgeous flowers around them.

Within any group, an individual has both shared and unique characteristics. Among refugees, for example, it is common to experience loss, trauma, and hope. A woman who leaves Syria shares some characteristics with all refugees. She also shares experiences with some groups of refugees—but, in other ways, she is like no other refugee. As another example, as a BYU student, you have something in common with every other student, something shared with certain groups of students, and some ways in which you are wholly and only yourself.<sup>5</sup> Finding what we have in common and what is unique about us can help us appreciate our shared humanity as well as our individual gifts.

As we grow and struggle, we continue to discover who we are. When there are aspects of ourselves or our experience that we don’t like, it can be tempting to pretend that these don’t exist. But when we are hurting or hiding, energy is constantly drawn back to those unaddressed issues. As if we are living with a festering wound, untended issues become difficult to heal. Especially when we feel stuck, resources that can help us know and value who we are include praying, honoring our agency, and finding supportive communities.

### ***Praying***

Prayer is a conduit for connection with a generous and patient God. Prayer involves recognizing our deepest desires, learning how to ask better questions, and listening to that which is beyond our limited understanding. In Malaysia, I worked with Muslim refugee women from Somalia who described a range of prayer practices. They repeated key phrases and engaged in consistent prayer in ways that helped them find peace and stay close to God. I feel closest to God when I am alone in places like the mountains, parks, or the temple. I also receive spiritual guidance and

strength by praying daily, reading the Book of Mormon, attending Church meetings, and listening to Church leaders. Through prayer, I feel God's love for me not only as a child of God but as a person who makes mistakes—someone with a range of identities and experiences. Each of these identities and experiences play a role in who I am. Seeking God through prayer can help us see aspects of ourselves that God already recognizes and embraces.

### *Honoring Our Agency*

Honoring our agency is another tool for knowing and valuing who we are. So much of what we do and become is based on what we choose. While we may face some physical or cultural limits, recognizing our agency allows us to be deliberate in exploring all our options and considering how to stretch into our unique gifts. My new stretch for this year has been rock climbing. Though my physical limitations indicate that I probably will not reach an expert level, my potential is determined most by my desires, efforts, and the support I receive along the way.

Agency can also help us choose how to approach things outside of our control. For displaced people, policy priorities and xenophobia create barriers to safety and growth. In some cases, refugees remain in detention-like camp conditions for decades. But even in the face of restricted opportunities, people find ways to thrive. As we finished a support group with refugee women from Afghanistan, the facilitator shared a fantastic cake decorated with candles and the words "Have Smile Forever." While working through hard things—such as discrimination and violence—these women also took time to celebrate and laugh. Even within limits, we can find ways to grow and shine.

Most of us face constraints regarding what we can study, where we can go, and what type of contribution we can envision making. But don't confuse the few real limitations you have with false limits that are not from God. Flowers grow differently based on whether they are planted inside or outside the house, in a garden or out in nature. Let the sun reach you where you are. Stay open to God's guidance and to the dreams and

desires that will help you find how to share your gifts and vision.

### *Finding Supportive Communities*

In addition to prayer and agency, another resource for knowing and valuing who you are is finding supportive communities. Some aspects of your experience may be stigmatized or difficult to talk about. Finding a place to work through challenges can bring healing and a sense of your inherent value. In groups with refugees, talking through difficulties and building coping skills leads to improved mental health. Helpful strategies include mindfulness, deep breathing, visualization, exercise, stretching, recognizing and accepting a full range of emotions, and taking time to relax and play. These practices also help me manage stress and find peace. When you struggle with pain, disappointment, and sin, find people and practices that help you feel your inherent value. When needed, access professional help to maintain well-being and self-worth.

God is the ultimate source of life and grace. Christ invites us to come with broken hearts (see 3 Nephi 9:20–22) as God's love gathers us "as a hen gathereth her chickens" (3 Nephi 10:4–6). I love this image of being tucked or cuddled under those nurturing wings. Especially in times of darkness and need, I have sought and felt that protective embrace from our Savior.

Knowing and valuing our full selves and addressing the complexity and griefs that are part of our stories centers us on our path of discipleship and allows us to look outward. I don't know what it is like to be a refugee. I don't know what it's like to lose the ability to walk or to lose a child or to go through things that I just haven't faced. Even when we share characteristics, we never fully understand someone else's experience. But I want to know as much as I can, and I want to serve those who are different from me. Acknowledging our situations with openness before God brings redemptive power to repent, forgive, and act. In working through weaknesses and pain, we can access God's power for healing and hope (see Ether 12:4). With this foundation of self-awareness, we see others with fewer blinders, and we serve with fewer unintended consequences.

### Learn to See and Love Others

A second aspect of discipleship is learning to see and love others. Christ taught us to love our neighbor and to love our enemies (see Matthew 5:43–48). In the parable of the good Samaritan, Christ framed the relationship between neighbors as involving people who typically do not interact. The neighbor Christ asked us to emulate is someone from a marginalized background who sees and responds to a person in crisis (see Luke 10:29–37). We too can see the people around us, and we must be willing to see their inherent value before we can effectively serve them.

The philosopher Martin Buber framed relationships as involving either “I and It” or “I and You.” The I–It approach occurs when we view others as objects, or as a means to an end—for example, how I might see someone who simply slows me down in line at the grocery store or makes me feel uncomfortable because of their style of clothing. When people are merely objects in our way, we limit them—and we limit ourselves. In contrast, the I–You perspective, also framed as “I and Thou,” involves genuine encounters with complex and eternal beings.<sup>6</sup> Approaching people with this sense of openness moves us beyond control, stereotypes, and objectification. Every person, whether a stranger or someone you have always known, is capable of surprising and teaching you.

We have similarities with most people we encounter. While working in Malaysia with people who were HIV positive or at high risk for HIV, I met Catholic and Muslim men who had male partners and who talked about how prayer brought them feelings of calm and of light. A transgender woman shared how prayer brought her solutions and healing when she was in prison.<sup>7</sup> My faith is strengthened by the beliefs and spiritual experiences of others.

In addition to appreciating similarities, we can welcome differences with curiosity instead of fear. When I was an undergraduate student at BYU, my best friend, Melody, was an international student from China with different religious beliefs. Our initial encounters involved laughter about language differences and getting through Economics 110, but our friendship grew because we had fun being together. What started with

time as roommates and our first trip to New York turned into a lifetime of friendship and adventures in Asia and elsewhere.

Who are you first drawn to in a class, neighborhood, or church setting? There are people in our communities who do not feel seen or welcomed. Among refugees who resettle in the United States, many experience discrimination due to religion, accent, and appearance. When describing the importance of genuine friendship with neighbors and the difficulties of being accepted, one young adult said, “I will never fully belong here.”<sup>8</sup> We can be better at finding similarities and appreciating differences. Reaching out to those on the margins can be helpful to them, and it can be transformative for you.

At the heart of learning to love and see others is desire and openness. But there are also practical skills you can learn, even across differences that seem daunting. In winter semesters, I often teach a class on direct social work practice. On the first day we talk about human interaction and brainstorm a list of skills that help us effectively engage with people. As a class, we choose the most central, overarching skills.

While many skills are valuable, we typically land on empathy as the most important skill. Students define empathy as feeling with people and joining others with compassion. In scripture, the phrase “mourn with those that mourn” (Mosiah 18:9) captures the essence of empathy. Alma pairs the people’s desire “to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people” with a willingness “to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light” and “to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:8–9). This ability to join people in grief and to share burdens is part of the baptismal covenant—and it is a skill we can strengthen.

Empathy is primarily about listening. Empathy allows us to trust and respect what another person experiences—to join them for a moment in their journey. In many cases this requires us to put our own agenda, needs, values, and experiences aside. We may be shocked by what someone has experienced or believes; it may be completely foreign to us or uncomfortable or something we believe is wrong. Empathy is still possible.

Jesus Christ demonstrated empathy through awareness of others in all encounters. He mourned with people as they grieved a lost loved one (see John 11:31–45). He listened to people’s stories (see Luke 24:15–32). When He visited the people of the Book of Mormon after His Resurrection, Christ perceived their thoughts and feelings and recognized their desires (see 3 Nephi 17:2–5). He responded with compassion and chose to stay present. After blessing and praying for the people, He said:

*My joy is full.*

*And when he had said these words, he wept . . . , and he took their little children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them.*

*And when he had done this he wept again.*

[3 Nephi 17:20–22]

Christ teaches us here how to love in a way that brings a fullness of joy. I am inspired by students who demonstrate empathy for people who committed serious crimes and for those they formerly feared or dismissed. Working with refugees, I have witnessed rage, need, and resignation. One late weekend night, I brought a young Burmese client home from the hospital for a short visit before he returned for an additional lengthy stay. He had already been hospitalized for months, and it was difficult for his family to visit regularly due to limited public transportation access and busy work schedules. Seeing the way that family embraced their brief time together and showed love for their son was profoundly humbling. To be present with others during moments of vulnerability allows us to feel God’s grace for them and for us.

### **Choose Lifelong Service**

Valuing ourselves and showing empathy for others provides a framework for lifelong service. Jesus modeled how to serve as He addressed people’s deepest needs through knowing their hearts and knowing their context (see John 8:3–11). Meaningful service doesn’t involve seeking attention or ignoring our desires (see Matthew 6:1–4; Luke 10:38–42). It is not an obligation we fulfill by pushing past our capacity (see Mosiah 4:27).

Lifelong service is a purpose of education at BYU; it is about channeling time, energy, and passion into living in a way that lifts others and improves our world.<sup>9</sup>

What gifts and vision do you bring to the challenges the world faces right now? There is no shortage of need; we live in an era of violence, greed, and oppression. In addition to the one hundred million people who are forcibly displaced, approximately twenty million people leave their homes each year due to extreme weather events.<sup>10</sup> More than two billion people only have access to contaminated water sources.<sup>11</sup> Sixty-four million children of primary school age do not have access to basic education.<sup>12</sup> And 22 percent of children under age five have stunted growth due to malnutrition.<sup>13</sup>

In the United States, more than 10 percent of households have insufficient resources for food<sup>14</sup> and twenty-eight million people do not have health insurance.<sup>15</sup> Disparities are widespread—infant mortality<sup>16</sup> and maternal mortality<sup>17</sup> vary drastically by race and ethnicity. Health care access,<sup>18</sup> economic opportunity,<sup>19</sup> and treatment within the criminal justice system<sup>20</sup> also differ significantly based on a person’s race and gender. Inequality continues to rise, and more resources are controlled by a smaller number of people.<sup>21</sup>

Also in the United States, more than forty-five thousand people die from gun violence every year.<sup>22</sup> More than one hundred seventeen thousand children are awaiting placement in a permanent home.<sup>23</sup> Approximately five hundred eighty thousand people are homeless.<sup>24</sup> More than half of Americans are lonely, with rates higher among young people.<sup>25</sup>

Here on the BYU campus, we are not immune to disparities and prejudice. Cultural norms limit women’s opportunities and confidence.<sup>26</sup> Racial and ethnic minority students can feel oppressed and unsafe, with some noting that “people have normalized aggressive comments here” and “I felt like I had to prove myself.”<sup>27</sup> Further, 38 percent of LGBTQ+ students do not feel valued as an individual at BYU and 25 percent of LGBTQ+ students feel unsafe on campus.<sup>28</sup>

These and other major challenges can feel overwhelming. But we can find solutions. We can envision a more just and loving world. Christ invites

us to be yoked with Him (see Matthew 11:29–30), and we can rely on His example and grace. As we listen without defensiveness, our growing consciousness can open to possibilities for change. We live in a time of unprecedented wealth, knowledge, and technology. Many of us have the great blessing of being able to access specialized training and education. Many of us can choose what to do for work and how to use financial resources that surpass our needs for food and shelter.

Your ability to address suffering starts with valuing who you are and learning to have empathy. More than focusing on a particular major, we need to feel responsibility for the world we share and to learn to see others as inherently valuable, regardless of their beliefs, racial identity, gender, sexual orientation, legal status, or other characteristics. The skills we need include creativity, teamwork, an ability to learn, and enough awareness to avoid doing harm. We need people who commit to nonviolence, who recognize truth, and who see the humanity of all people. If you have the privilege of choosing how to support yourself and your family, consider incorporating service as part of that path. And whatever you choose, service can be a central part of your work with colleagues, clients, and systems. In any life path, service is a manifestation of your discipleship.

### *Macro-Level Change*

In social work, we talk about macro- and micro-level change. Macro-level change involves attention to policy, societal norms, and large-scale systems. As a global community, we need people who can envision and work toward “a better world” (Ether 12:4). You will find a role as you learn about what is happening, exercise your constitutional right to vote, and see yourself as part of building a healthier society.

Macro-level change most often happens slowly, with the vision and effort of large groups of people. My work with refugee communities feels like a tiny drop in the ocean. But I am grateful to be a part of envisioning and hoping for a world in which immigration policies center on safety and well-being rather than on profit and fear. When imagining migration solutions,

I appreciate the story of the people of Ammon as described in Alma 27. As this group of refugees fled religious persecution, their former enemies chose to provide them with land and protection—a bright moment when the Nephites saw those in need as family (see Alma 27:22–24). We too can seek solutions through prayer and in collective action. We can share and honor our faith while seeing those with different backgrounds as our sisters and brothers.

### *Micro-Level Change*

In addition to addressing large-scale challenges, service at the micro-level is pretty much always needed everywhere. This service involves efforts to “lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees” (Doctrine and Covenants 81:5; see also Hebrews 12:12). Each person around us needs empathy, and many need help finding solutions and resources. Lifting up the hands that hang down happens as we support people in choosing their own path forward.

It takes time and patience to find solutions. When I reflect on my time as a caseworker with resettled refugees, the stories I remember most are those that were not neatly resolved. I worked with a brilliant mother who failed to qualify for a liver transplant. Before her death, she focused on finding support for her sons. In another case, a family moved into a great new apartment, only to be forced to move out two days later due to unclear requirements.

Many issues in people’s lives and on a larger, global scale will not be resolved quickly or in the way we want. Giving service does not guarantee we will fix things or reach a particular outcome. Service also won’t necessarily provide a sense of worth. Seeking personal value in service is a recipe for taking on too much and becoming angry when people don’t appreciate you. Your value is independent of any service you can give. Service is ultimately about sharing the fruits of God’s love that we have so generously received. God will amplify our limited efforts and inspire transformation. Our great opportunity is to choose to share and to become a conduit through which love and grace can come.

## Find Joy

Choosing to love God and seeking to be a disciple of Christ can yield sweet fruit and moments of joy. Self-awareness, empathy, and service do not free us from disappointment. But God can turn mourning into joy, as even the aspects of our stories that we shy away from become essential elements of our discipleship. The humility we gain from experience can help us see all who cry out for help as God's beloved children. As we join others on their paths, we will witness God's love for each human soul and God's ability "to give . . . beauty for ashes [and] the oil of joy for mourning" (Isaiah 61:3).

In Utah, I love the short moment in May when the mountains are bright green. During springtime in Japan, people gather to enjoy the cherry blossoms, and the celebration is simply magical. Since returning from Japan, I wait and watch for the spring blossoms every year. I hope you can celebrate the fruits and blossoms that come along your path of discipleship. I am grateful for moments of insight, connection, and healing—times when I have felt both joy and grace. As we, with others, "wait upon the Lord," our strength will be renewed, and we "shall mount up with wings as eagles" (Isaiah 40:31). I know that God will lift us as we strive to see and serve this world. I leave you with my testimony that this gospel is God's work, and I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

## Notes

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2. Daria Nastasiuk, "My Advice to Other Kids as a Refugee from Ukraine? Appreciate What You Have," as told to Charlie Dunmore and Irina Odobescu, Stories, UNHCR, 18 May 2022, [unhcr.org/news/stories/2022/5/6284e9944](https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2022/5/6284e9944).
3. "I Am a Child of God," *Hymns*, 2002, no. 301.
4. See Russell M. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity," worldwide devotional for young adults, 15 May 2022, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson: "First and foremost, you are a child of God. Second, as a member of the Church, you are a child of the covenant. And third, you are a disciple of Jesus Christ."](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson: )

5. See Clyde Kluckhohn and Henry A. Murray, "Personality Formation: The Determinants," chapter 2 in Clyde Kluckhohn, Henry A. Murray, and David M. Schneider, eds., *Personality in Nature, Society, and Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 53–67.

6. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou: A New Translation with a Prologue "I and You" and Notes by Walter Kaufmann*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 59–62.

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9. See Mission of Brigham Young University (4 November 1981); see also Aims of a BYU Education (1 March 1995).

10. See "Climate Change and Disaster Displacement," Environment, Disasters, and Climate Change, UNHCR, [unhcr.org/en-us/climate-change-and-disasters](https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/climate-change-and-disasters).

11. See "Drinking-Water," Detail, World Health Organization (WHO), 21 March 2022, [who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/drinking-water](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/drinking-water).

12. See "Primary Education," United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), June 2022, [data.unicef.org/topic/education/primary-education](https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/primary-education).

13. See FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development), UNICEF, WFP (World Food Programme), and WHO, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021: Transforming Food Systems for Food Security, Improved Nutrition, and*

*Affordable Healthy Diets for All* (Rome: FAO, 2021), xvi, [fao.org/publications/sofi/2021/en](http://fao.org/publications/sofi/2021/en); see also “Nutrition,” UNICEF, [unicef.org/nutrition](http://unicef.org/nutrition).

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25. Richard Weissbourd, Milena Batanova, Virginia Lovison, and Eric Torres, “Loneliness in America: How the Pandemic Has Deepened an Epidemic of Loneliness and What We Can Do About It,” Making Caring Common Project: Harvard Graduate School of Education, February 2021, [mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/loneliness-in-america](http://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/loneliness-in-america); see also “Loneliness Is at Epidemic Levels in America,” Newsworthy, Cigna Research Center, [newsroom.cigna.com/loneliness-in-america](http://newsroom.cigna.com/loneliness-in-america).

26. See Mikaela Dufur, Joyce Adams, Bruce Burgon, Erin Holmes, Gordon Limb, and Wendy



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27. Statements made by BYU students; quoted in "Report and Recommendations of the BYU Committee on Race, Equity, and Belonging," BYU Committee on Race, Equity, and Belonging, Brigham Young University, February 2021, 8, 7.

28. See "Report on the Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault," Brigham Young University, March 2022, 6.