

Our Own Best Story

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Sister Gong and I are grateful to be here at Brigham Young University today. We express deep appreciation to President and Sister Worthen and a warm welcome to President and Sister Reese. And congratulations to our BYU coaches and student athletes for their Easter testimonies, which I am told have reached nearly half a million people.

We have two Susan Gongs with us today. One is my dear wife, Susan Lindsay Gong. One is my brother Brian's wife, Susan Peterson Gong. Between the two Susan Gongs, they have earned six degrees from BYU: two bachelor's, three master's, and a PhD. Both have loved teaching here at BYU.

Finals begin next week, and, if things go well, commencement will occur on April 27 for those who are graduating. Best wishes for finals and congratulations to those graduating. Double best wishes for those still coming down the home stretch to graduation.

For a number of years, one of my very favorite BYU assignments was teaching a late-summer

honors class in international relations. I wanted the class to grapple with real international issues, so I gave the students challenging case studies and small-group assignments.

One day the class said, "Professor Gong, we didn't finish our assignment until 3 a.m. this morning."

I felt terrible. Then I thought to ask, "What time did you begin your assignment?"

The class said, "Well, first we had to get something to eat. Then we were having so much fun in our small groups that we didn't begin our assignment until 2 a.m."

I didn't feel so bad after that.

Connection and Transformation

Over the years, I have been intrigued by connections that transform our physical world. For each of us, connection and transformation are also at the heart of our own best story. Covenant belonging connects us with our most transformative relationships—including with God, with each other, and with our best selves.

Gerrit W. Gong, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this devotional address on April 11, 2023.

First, let Sister Gong and me invite you to join a Saturday morning family online conversation about ChatGPT; second, an adventure at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina; third, a visit to the Panama Canal; and, finally, a surprise personal invitation arising from something our family calls an “art attack.”

An Online Family Thread

First, a family Saturday morning online conversation. It began like this.

[Hmm. ChatGPT.]

As a reminder, ChatGPT stands for “generative pre-trained transformer,” an artificial intelligence model that “interacts in a conversational way” to “answer . . . questions, admit its mistakes, challenge incorrect premises, and reject inappropriate requests.”¹

Our online family thread continues.

[Chat, write a journal entry about a Gong family reunion.]

[Chat: Today was the Gong family reunion, and it was a truly special occasion. We arrive at the lodge early in the morning, eager to catch up with our extended family. . . . The food was delicious, and we were all impressed by the skills of the chefs at the lodge.]

Impressive, but not true. Gong reunions don’t have fancy lodges or chefs. We have fun and great memories, but not in the way that Chat fantasizes.

Our online family conversation continues.

[I love that all the engineers on hacker news are playing around with Chat and talking about how they can’t wait to automate salespeople, and all the salespeople are saying they can’t wait to automate their engineering and IT teams.]

[It’s pretty amazing tech, though. I’ve been playing around this week. I’ll send some links.]

[Chat, write an imaginary business plan for a business to train dogs to operate nuclear power plants.]

[Chat: Our company, Nuclear Paws, is a unique and innovative business that trains dogs to operate nuclear power plants. . . . Once a dog has completed our training program, they are able to safely and efficiently operate a nuclear power plant, providing a reliable and cost-effective source of energy.]

[Chat, please provide a testimonial for a happy customer of Nuclear Paws.]

[Chat: I recently had the pleasure of working with Nuclear Paws to train my dog, Max, to operate our nuclear power plant. I have to say, I was skeptical at first, but the team at Nuclear Paws quickly proved me wrong. Now Max is able to safely and efficiently operate our power plant, and he does an incredible job. . . . Thank you, Nuclear Paws!]

[Certain types of thought work are about to get much, much faster and scalable. Other parts are going to be completely commoditized.]

We had much more to say about transformative technologies. But let’s leave our family conversation with a concluding thought about digital storage. It is reported that four companies collectively hold 1,200 petabytes of digital storage. If “a three-minute song uses about three megabytes of storage,” that is “400 trillion songs or 1.2 quadrillion minutes of music. That’s more than 2.2 billion years of audio.”² That is a lot of Elvis, Taylor Swift, and Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square.

The World’s First Powered Flight

Now let’s look at a second transformative technology. Let’s travel to Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. The Wright brothers, as you know, chose Kitty Hawk because it has strong winds with which to take off and soft sands on which to land. At Kitty Hawk, Sister Gong and I tried hang gliding. We were glad for strong winds but especially for soft sands.

Today we take ubiquitous commercial flight for granted, but let’s consider for a moment the miracle of the first powered flight that connected and transformed the world.

On December 17, 1903, Orville and Wilbur took turns piloting the world’s first powered sustained flights. Orville flew 120 feet in 12 seconds; Wilbur, 175 feet in 12 seconds; Orville, 200 feet in 15 seconds; and, finally, Wilbur, 852 feet in 59 seconds.³ From these simple beginnings, powered flight globalized communications, travel, warfare, and so on.

As an aside, we have fine Wright brothers’ biographies. However, I hope someone—perhaps someone here today—will explore the faith of the

Wright family. Did the family's faith in God contribute to Orville and Wilbur's determined belief that they could change the world for good?

Some years after I had visited Kitty Hawk, I witnessed continuing aviation advances at a Boeing manufacturing facility. My host pointed to two planes on the tarmac.

The B-52, he explained, has four engine pods. Each houses two engines. Each engine generates about 10,000 pounds of thrust. That gives the eight engines on a B-52 about 80,000 total pounds of thrust.⁴

The 777, my host continued, has just two engines. Each engine on a 777 generates some 80,000 pounds for about 160,000 total pounds of thrust.⁵ Put another way, one engine on a 777 generates as much thrust as eight engines on a B-52. That's transformative change!

Incidentally, designers of the 777 pioneered CAD-CAM, computer-aided design and computer-aided manufacturing. These processes have transformed manufacturing all over the world.

For years, my favorite display at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC, included the original *Wright Flyer*, and next to it, a piece of the moon brought from the first moon landing.

The elapsed time between the first Wright brothers flight in 1903 and the first moon landing in 1969 was sixty-six years—one lifetime.⁶ Imagine the technological changes that will occur in your lives.

The Panama Canal

For a third example of transformative change, please come with Sister Gong and me to the Panama Canal at the canal's Miraflores Locks.

In the words of historian David McCullough, in its day, the Panama Canal "represented the largest, most costly single effort ever before mounted anywhere on earth."⁷

When it opened on August 15, 1914, the Panama Canal transformed trade, travel, communications, and so on. As we do with air and space flight, we now take for granted the difference the Panama Canal makes every day in our lives.

The Panama Canal connects 180 sea routes and interweaves 1,920 ports in 170 countries.⁸

More than a million ships have passed through the canal since its opening,⁹ including more than 14,200 ships last year.¹⁰ By reducing the sailing distance between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans by some 8,000 nautical miles, the canal cuts twenty-two sailing days off many journeys.¹¹

And here's a fun fact: tolls to cross the Panama Canal range from \$260,000 for a neo-Panamax tanker to the thirty-six cents that Richard Halliburton was charged when he swam the canal in 1928.¹²

"One Thing Which Is of More Importance Than They All"

So what do these three examples have in common? For me, ChatGPT, air and space travel, and the Panama Canal dramatically illustrate how physical or digital connections can transform our external environment.

Yet, however much our external physical environment may change, that which matters most spiritually does not change. As the prophet Alma declared, "There is one thing which is of more importance than they all."¹³ Of all the many things that beckon for our attention, that which ultimately matters most does not change: who we are spiritually (our spiritual identity), whose we are (covenant belonging), and how we use our God-given agency to discover and become our own best story.

Who We Are

The realities of Easter testify that our most profound personal transformation occurs when our spirit and body are united, including in resurrection, to become our immortal soul. As the Doctrine and Covenants teaches, "The elements are eternal, and spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy."¹⁴ The spiritual transformation we most desire comes as we are spiritually born again in Jesus Christ—in our actions, in our attitudes, and in our being.

We are meant, as the prophet Lehi found, to connect and be transformed because of our family relationships.

Let's recall Lehi's experience. In the Book of Mormon in 1 Nephi 5, we are told by Nephi that Lehi

*took the records . . . , and he **did** search them from the beginning. . . .*

*. . . Lehi . . . found upon the plates of brass **a genealogy of his fathers**; wherefore he knew that he was **a descendant of Joseph**; yea, even that Joseph who was . . . **preserved by the hand of the Lord**. [Lehi learned his family story, and it inspired him.] . . .*

*And now when my father saw all these things, he was **filled with the Spirit**, and began to prophesy concerning his seed.¹⁵*

And don't you love verse 22? These family and spiritual records were so important to Lehi and his family that they carried the heavy plates as they "journeyed in the wilderness" and across the ocean to "the land of promise."¹⁶

Today, thanks to modern technology [holding up a phone], we can hold in our hands and carry with us our own brass plates—the scriptures, the words of the prophets, and our living family records. We can contribute to our living memories and family records so they "never perish" nor are "dimmed any more by time."¹⁷ Revelatory experiences with our own brass plates can repeatedly guide our journey toward our promised land.

No generation is better prepared than yours to contribute and make a difference in bringing together God's family—the family of all humanity. You are digital natives. Your world has always been connected by the internet, smartphones, and social media. Some of you are adept at machine learning; thank you for helping connect individual names into relationships that can help unite families for eternity. Some of you are preserving family records in archives, clan genealogies, and oral histories. Thank you.

And most of us are already preserving our stories in videos, social media posts, and journal reflections. Please be intentional about recording your faith and feelings. These records can bless your life and generations to come.

A Lehi experience is a modern miracle. Using new technologies, more people in more places than ever before are discovering and connecting with family records and stories. That includes many of you who are connected with the worldwide phenomenon we call RootsTech and FamilySearch, which is now in 242 countries and

territories. With more than a million unique visitors every week—a majority of whom are general-public friends—and forty-five homelands and counting, most individuals looking for family find names of ancestors.

Always, each individual matters. It is why I playfully say that all of us are unique. I am the only person I know with my particular combination of Dutch, American, and Chinese names—as in Gerrit Walter Gong.

Of course, each of you is likewise unique. We have multiple sources—our names, traditions, and even food—that contribute to our personality. But as President Russell M. Nelson beautifully teaches, our enduring spiritual identity comes when we see ourselves as "a child of God, a child of the covenant, and a disciple of Jesus Christ."¹⁸

Whose We Are

We understand who we are when we understand whose we are. Recently a senior rabbi playfully explained to me why the Talmud says God's children all descend from Adam and Eve. "It is," the rabbi smiled, "so no one can say their father is better than anyone else's father."

Arthur Henry King was twice decorated by England's Queen Elizabeth II for his worldwide professional contributions.¹⁹ Later in his life he became a devout convert to the Church and a BYU professor of English. Professor King often described how lonely and dreary the world is without the restored gospel. He knew from experience. Based on his global experience, he emphasized that true brotherhood and sisterhood are ultimately only possible because of the Fatherhood of God. So much of this world's contention and violence, inequality, inequity, and injustice come from our not understanding and not treating each other as brothers and sisters of our Heavenly Father.

Our own best story comes when we choose covenant belonging—belonging by covenant with God and with each other. Please remember the truth President Nelson taught in his worldwide devotional "Choices for Eternity": "You get to decide what kind of life *you* want to live forever."²⁰ And President Nelson called on each of us recently, saying the world has never needed our

faith in Jesus Christ or our willingness to follow the Prince of Peace as peacemakers as much as it does now.²¹

Every man-made “I choose me” philosophy pales in comparison to the infinitely grand and glorious promise that we can learn to bless those around us as our Savior would and that we can receive all that God our Eternal Father has.²² This includes the worlds without number that the James Webb Space Telescope is just beginning to hint at. It includes the eternal life our Father in Heaven and His Beloved Son want to share so we can be happy and forever.

Our own best story transcends narrow self-interest and mortality-blinded understanding. It encompasses our legacy of faith, our trust that God knows who we are and that He cares about us in matters large and small. Of course, none of us is perfect. We all make mistakes and move away from Him at times. But His light is always on. Please recast any feeling of superiority or guilt that may be separating you from God or His restored Church as an invitation to come and experience again Jesus Christ’s love.

God always cares about our trajectory. Humbly we do our best, knowing perfection is in Jesus Christ. As we trust God, we step off this world’s perfectionist treadmill and its siren song that we are inadequate and never good enough. As we trust God, we find peace, hope, and a way forward. What we do has consequences. God does care about what we do.

God our Father and our Savior Jesus Christ always know and have our best interests at heart. As we travel life’s path, we often find things we need along the way—evidence that Someone who loves us knew we would be coming.²³

Sometimes we want God to tell us more; sometimes we want Him to tell us less. Usually though, through the Holy Ghost, He manifests His eternal, omniscient love by what and when He gives us what He knows will bless us most.

To those who wait with faith, His promise is sure: “The Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.”²⁴

Sacred instruction and endowments of knowledge, strength, and power are found in the holy house of the Lord. It is a principle of the universe that good rebounds to us when we unselfishly seek to do good for someone else that they cannot do for themselves. No wonder President Nelson encourages us to change the world by transforming ourselves and those around us by connecting to God by covenants—the strongest bonds in heaven and on earth.

How We Use Our God-Given Agency

Powerful life-changing connections and transformations occur when we apply fundamental prerequisites for learning found in the house of the Lord and at the university.

Please discover purity of heart, clarity of purpose, humility, and wise persistence in prioritized, productive effort. These teach us better than compartmentalizing what we think and do on Sunday from what we think and do Monday through Saturday. Truly the restored gospel of Jesus Christ makes our individual slices of daily bread into a whole loaf.²⁵

In all we do, we put Jesus Christ first. As a matter of priority, we put Jesus Christ first among all the things we do. As a matter of focus, we put Jesus Christ first in each thing we do.

In the days to come, the Lord is counting on you to speak His truth with kindness and, in faith and humility, to speak with the power of His truth.

A Place That You Can Transform

Well, we come full circle.

Our final example of connection and transformation I describe as an “art attack.” An art attack is what our family calls it when those associated with a special needs school, an orphanage, or a community center gather with their friends to paint and therefore transform a large (if I can say it, usually ugly) wall into a fun, colorful mural.

Sister Gong has organized community art attack mural experiences in Nepal, Vietnam, West Malaysia, Cambodia, and Utah in refugee, childcare, and special needs community centers and schools.

So, here's the invitation. Please watch this time-lapse video that condenses a two-day mural creation process into two minutes. As you watch, please ask yourself, "If I could curate a five-minute time-lapse video of my life between today, April 11, and October 1, 2023, how would I write and how would I produce my own best story?"

Ready? Here we go! [A video was shown of a group of people creating a colorful wall mural.]

What do you think? Is there a neglected wall or a drab place in your life that you can transform and bring into full living color through Jesus Christ? Please remember that small, positive changes like single strokes with a brush compounded over time are often more transformative than unimplemented big hopes.

Charity Endures Forever

Outward things change—shipping routes, flight patterns, and digital applications—but charity, the pure love of Christ, endures forever.²⁶ And again quoting the prophet Alma, asking those of us who in general enjoy prosperous circumstances, please do "not send away any who [are] naked, or . . . hungry, or that [are] athirst, or . . . sick, or that [have] not been nourished." Please do "not set [your] hearts upon riches [but be] liberal to all, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, whether out of the church or in the church, having no respect to persons as to those who [stand] in need."²⁷

May we "pray unto the Father," dear brothers and sisters, "with all the energy of heart, that [we] may be filled with this love [the pure love of Christ], which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ."²⁸ This charity comes as we know who we are and whose we are and as we discover and become our own best story.

Thank you for reaching inward and outward as a peacemaking disciple of Jesus Christ. Thank you for living the restored gospel with serendipity and intentionality, for joyfully obeying His commandments, knowing He gives them in perfect love so we can be truly happy and truly free.

I thank God for our remarkable prophet, President Russell M. Nelson, our First Presidency,

and inspiration and revelation for us as individuals and as a church.

I bear testimony and witness that the eternal truths in the Book of Mormon, the exalting covenants of the house of the Lord, the testimonies of the prophets and apostles, and especially the supernal gift of the Holy Ghost connect and transform us in Jesus Christ as you write your own best story. As His witness, I joyfully testify of Him, in His sacred and holy name, even Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. "Introducing ChatGPT—Optimizing Language Models for Dialogue," openai.com, accessed February 11, 2023.
2. Section "How much data lives on the internet?" in "How Big Is the Internet," Inside the Internet, Starry Internet, 29 July 2019, starry.com/blog/inside-the-internet/how-big-is-the-internet.
3. See "Wright Brothers National Memorial: Site of the First Controlled Powered Flight (Teaching with Historic Places)," Wright Brothers National Memorial, National Parks Service, nps.gov/articles/wright-brothers-national-memorial-site-of-the-first-controlled-powered-flight-teaching-with-historic-places.htm.
4. See "Boeing B-52A," Air Force, af.mil/News/Photos/igphoto/2000593907.
5. See "777 Commercial Transport," Historical Snapshot, Boeing, boeing.com/history/products/777.page.
6. See Stanley I. Weiss and Amir R. Amir, "Aerospace Industry," Britannica.com, britannica.com/technology/aerospace-industry.
7. David McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870–1914* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 11.
8. The Panama Canal (@thepanamacanal), "For today's #2022Highlight," Twitter, December 19, 2022, twitter.com/thepanamacanal.
9. The Panama Canal (@thepanamacanal), "We're proud to have facilitated," Twitter, March 20, 2023, twitter.com/thepanamacanal.
10. *Annual Report 2022—Panama Canal*, February 2023, 6, 14, 35, pancanal.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Informe-2022-Eng.pdf.

11. See section “3. How much time is saved by crossing it?” in Prajyot Sinha, “Ten Important Panama Canal Facts Everyone Should Know,” *Marine Insight*, 4 June 2022, marineinsight.com/guidelines/10-important-panama-canals-facts-everyone-should-know.

12. See section “4. How much does it cost to transit the Panama Canal?” in Sinha, “Ten Important Panama Canal Facts.”

13. Alma 7:7.

14. Doctrine and Covenants 93:33; see also Doctrine and Covenants 88:15 and 138:17.

15. 1 Nephi 5:10, 14, 17; emphasis added.

16. 1 Nephi 5:22.

17. 1 Nephi 5:19.

18. Russell M. Nelson, “Choices for Eternity,” worldwide devotional for young adults, 15 May 2022.

19. Arthur Henry King was twice decorated by England’s Queen Elizabeth II (O.B.E. and C.B.E.) for his work overseas in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language (TESOL).

20. Nelson, “Choices for Eternity”; emphasis in original.

21. See Russell M. Nelson, “Peacemakers Needed,” *Liahona*, May 2023.

22. See Doctrine and Covenants 84:38.

23. I learned this idea and wording from President Boyd K. Packer.

24. Isaiah 40:31.

25. I was first introduced to the wonderful idea of sacramental life while I was a student at BYU.

26. See Moroni 7:47.

27. Alma 1:30.

28. Moroni 7:47–48.