

Six Things I Believe

GUS L. HART

Thank you, President Reese, for that introduction. I appreciate our friendship and the many fun memories we have made over the years.

My young friends—and some of those not so young—thank you for being here. You are the reason I love working at BYU.

Now, I want you to hold out your hand, look at the tip of your finger, and imagine a single grain of sand. Hold your finger at arm's length and imagine the tiny patch of sky that would be covered by that grain of sand. In 1995 astronomers pointed the Hubble Space Telescope at a dark patch of sky about that size where nothing was visible. But when the image was exposed for more than one hundred hours, objects that are so far away that they are trillions of times too faint to be seen with your eyes were revealed for the first time. There are more than 3,000 galaxies in that small patch of sky. Each of those galaxies contains billions of stars.

In 2012 a similar image was created for a different patch of sky by combining multiple Hubble images. Just as in the original deep-field image, thousands of new galaxies were discovered. Whatever tiny, tiny patch of sky we point a powerful enough telescope at, we see thousands of galaxies far away.

This latest deep-field image [a photo was shown] from the James Webb Space Telescope shows some galaxies so far away that it took more than thirteen billion years for the light to reach us. We see them as they were more than thirteen billion years ago, when the universe was only 4 percent of its current age. If the universe is now a young adult, some of these galaxies were formed when the universe was just learning to walk.

In our own galaxy, the solar system began forming from a large cloud of gas and dust that collapsed 4,600 million years ago. Eventually the center of our solar system became dense enough

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for the sun to form. Planets also formed: gas giants such as Jupiter, rocky terrestrials such as our earth, and the not-demoted-but-in-a-class-of-their-own dwarf planets such as Pluto, Eris, and Haumea.

Our own planet began to form, and evidence suggests that in the process it was struck by a Mars-sized protoplanet. That collision tilted the earth on its axis (giving us yearly seasons), and the debris from the collision formed the moon (giving us tides and beautiful moonlight). And so the history of the earth began.

I like to think of the earth's history as a four-volume set of 4,600 pages, with each page chronicling one million years. I am wonderstruck when I think about where the different historical events would fit in this account.

Single-celled life would debut at the end of volume one.

Multicellular life would not appear until sometime in volume four! Isn't that amazing?

Pangea, that supercontinent you learned about in eighth-grade earth science? It didn't form until about 250 pages from the end of volume four—about the same time that dinosaurs were on the rise.

And then, sixty-six pages from the end of the last volume, an asteroid about the size of the Provo-Orem area impacted the earth. That cataclysm and its aftermath killed 75 percent of earth's animal species but paved the way for large mammals to replace dinosaurs as the celebrities of the animal kingdom. It transformed the earth to accommodate human life.

A lot of things happened at the end of volume four. And yet everything we might think of as recent happened on the last page. In fact, all of human civilization happens on the very last *line* of the very last page of volume four. Isn't that incredible? If you were writing that last line, what would it say?

1. God Is Patient

I believe God is patient. The time He took to prepare the universe and this earth—arranging for humankind, His children—is astonishing. The scripture "This is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life

of man"¹ takes on a new dimension from this perspective. Our Heavenly Father is patient. He is playing the long game. From this view, my impatience with Him in things that I ask for seems especially acute. He reminds me in Isaiah, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways."² The Book of Mormon prophet Jacob said it directly: "Behold, great and marvelous are the works of the Lord."³

In my address today I would like to share with you six things I believe. That was the first: God is patient.

2. God's Plans Are Better Than My Plans

I believe God's plans are better than my plans. I believe He knows better than I do what will make me happy, what will bring me peace, and what will be best for me. When I was eighteen years old and awaiting a mission call, I hoped to go someplace foreign and interesting—but English speaking. An experience studying Spanish as a child had convinced me that learning another language was very hard. My work ethic was not up to the task. Besides, I was a picky eater, and I worried about the foods in an unfamiliar culture.

People would ask me, "Where do you want to go?"

"Anywhere but Salt Lake City or Japan!" I would say.

They would ask, "Why not Japan?" (But never "Why not Salt Lake City?")

When I opened my call to the Japan Kobe Mission, I was overcome by a sense of humility. Japan was God's plan; it wasn't my plan. I would find out it was a better plan. It was a much better plan. How much my missionary service impacted my future!

My companions and missionary friends were wonderful. When I was assigned to the mission office, I learned directly from two mission presidents and their wives. But these blessings were blessings I could have had wherever I was assigned. Other blessings were Japan-specific.

For instance, I learned to love so many foods. Surprising myself, I absolutely loved learning Japanese. And the exposure to a different culture impacted me in so many ways. It expanded how I viewed people, especially at church. It challenged

my political views and assumptions in my own culture. It helped me be more broad-minded. Even today it continues to affect my thinking.

My love for learning Japanese—along with the influence of one of my companions—also unexpectedly changed my mind about BYU. Longer hair had been part of my plan; BYU had not been part of my plan. But in my first semester here, two crucial things happened.

First, I learned about a fellowship funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education.

Second—and I am making this story very short—I introduced myself to a Cynthia in my apartment complex. Not knowing there were two Cynthias living there, I mistook one for the other and talked to the wrong one. Thirty-three years later, I count that as the best mistake of my life! And somehow one of those Japanese fellowships was awarded to me.

Cynthia and I prayerfully decided to get married, and we moved to Japan for a year to study at Shizuoka University. It was an incredible way to start our marriage. And there was another pragmatic blessing—a financial one. I honed my Japanese skills while on the fellowship. This made it possible for me to work as a freelance translator and support my young family while I was in graduate school.

My mission experience changed the course of my life. But God wasn't done messing with my plans. Career-wise, He had a detour in mind for me too.

After having declared seven majors during my undergraduate experience (it is probably my fault that policies are what they are these days), I was grateful to finally stumble across and fall in love with physics. I decided that I wanted to grow up and become a physics professor. That hope matured into a desire to return to BYU. I liked that plan *a lot*, and so did Cynthia. We would be close to our families in Idaho and Utah. We set our hearts on that plan.

Less than one year into my postdoctoral position at a national laboratory, an unexpected opportunity arose that we felt we should accept. After I had completed my postdoctoral position, we moved not to Provo but to Flagstaff, Arizona. Northern Arizona University was not

BYU, Flagstaff was far from our extended family, and my new department did not have others in my research area who I could collaborate with. This was not our plan. Maybe it didn't even seem like a good plan, and it was not what we thought we wanted. Neither of us had ever even been to Arizona! But it was God's plan for us.

Some of our Flagstaff experiences are sweet beyond words for me. We loved our friends at church. Some became lifelong friends. But perhaps more important was the fact that we had opportunities to be friends with so many who were not members of the Church and to share our faith with some of them, especially our neighbors. I learned that one neighbor was a former Latter-day Saint. We became friends and talked openly about where he was on his faith journey. Eventually his wife and two of her children joined the Church.

One evening while walking up the street, I saw him out front putting out his garbage cans. The Spirit encouraged me to encourage him—again. I rolled my eyes at the Spirit. My neighbor didn't need pressure from me; I had already encouraged him.

My neighbor told me later that the Spirit was working on him, too, at that moment, but he said in his mind, "I don't want Gus to talk to me about that again right now."

But we both gave in to the Spirit that night, and we talked about the neighbor coming back to the Church. He connected with our bishop, started the process to return, and was soon baptized. Now I don't know if my role was crucial in those events, but what a blessing to be part of them!

Another young family in the neighborhood became friends with us and with several other families in our congregation. We loved getting to know that family and seeing their goodness. Eventually they were invited to church. Soon they were baptized. I was asked to perform one of the baptismal ordinances. A year later, Cynthia and I had the tender experience of attending their sealing in the Mesa Arizona Temple. The way they internalized the gospel strengthens and inspires me.

There were many more Flagstaff blessings. I wish I had time to share more, but, lucky for you, I don't!

3. Everyone Has Something to Contribute

Another thing I believe? Each of you has something to contribute. Your passions, your skills, and even your struggles can bless the world. The world is big enough that you have a unique mission. Believe that even if you feel unrecognized.

Not every singer will sing on Broadway. Not every writer will write a bestseller or win the Newbery Medal. Not every science professor will publish in the journals *Nature* or *Science*. Your contributions still matter. But I don't only believe that you are unique and that you have a special mission. I also believe you can be *amazing*. You have a gift to become stellar at something you choose.

Maybe, though, you don't think you have a math brain, or you believe you are too uncoordinated for a particular sport or too old to start learning to play classical guitar. Maybe you think you must be born with some special brain structure to be a great writer, cellist, or painter or to understand accounting, chemistry, or engineering design. Maybe you don't feel particularly gifted or you wish you had a different gift than the one you think you received. But we all have a gift—an amazing gift, a gift that makes anything possible. That gift is our brain!

A brain has plasticity. It can change. It can grow. Nobody starts life with a cello brain or a math brain or a chess brain or a Van Gogh art brain—not even Van Gogh!⁴

A few years ago I enjoyed Anders Ericsson's book *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise*, which explained his research into extraordinary human performance and how it can be achieved through what he calls "deliberate practice." He debunks the myth of a born prodigy and makes a compelling argument that virtually anyone can accomplish extraordinary things because of their brain.⁵ About fifteen years ago I visited my brother- and sister-in-law in London. A few times we rode in the famous London black cabs. The cabbies needed no GPS or even an address; with only a rough description, they could get us to our destination.

Later I learned from Ericsson's book that becoming a London cabbie is extremely difficult. It requires years of study, many exams, and driving around the city solo, taking notes. The cabbies

must be thoroughly familiar with all of the area within six miles of Charing Cross Station, which contains about twenty-five thousand streets. They must also be familiar with museums, hotels, theaters, schools, government offices—anyplace that a resident or a tourist might want to go. One might assume you have to be a born genius to become a London cabbie. There are no born geniuses! Even you can become a London cabbie because you have an adaptable brain. Brain scans revealed that part of the cabbies' brains actually grew. And when the cabbies retired and stopped stretching themselves, their brains shrank to normal again.⁶

Until about two decades ago, scientists believed that once a person reached adulthood, their brain was essentially hardwired; it couldn't change anymore. But we now understand that your brain is like your lungs or your muscles. With exercise and with the right training, it can change and it can grow. Ericsson's research shows that our potential because of our brains is almost limitless.⁷

Please don't leave this earth having passed up the joy of becoming amazing at something. Believe that you can achieve. Believe it is never too late to learn something new. You can't do everything. But *do do something!*

4. *Sukoshi Zutsu No Chikara* (The Power of Little by Little)

I believe in *sukoshi zutsu no chikara* (少しつづの力), which means "the power of little by little." Little by little is how you accomplish something amazing—the power of deliberate practice, applied consistently. Small upward steps. I eventually became a fluent Japanese speaker by learning a few dozen words and one or two grammar principles each day.

Regularly making small efforts may sound easy to you, but consistency is hard for me. Ever since I was a student at BYU, I have wanted to play classical guitar. I had tried to learn several times over a period of almost thirty years, but I wasn't consistent enough to make progress. Then, a few years ago, while I was still busy being a bishop, dad, husband, and professor, I felt heaven's nudge. It was finally time to learn guitar—something my Heavenly Father knew would bring me a feeling of fulfillment.

So I started—practicing on my own at first. Once I had some momentum, I found a teacher. (Thank you, Larry!) For the last five years I have tried to practice daily, at least a little. Sometimes I miss my practice session. I am not amazing yet. But I am so much better than I was. I am five years closer to amazing. More important, playing the guitar has brought me an acute joy. I am not playing in Carnegie Hall, but that is not the point. Besides, my wife loves it when I play next to her while she knits. She says I am great background music.

Progress is incremental, “line upon line, precept upon precept.”⁸ Consistency pays off. The Doctrine and Covenants teaches, “Out of small things proceedeth that which is great.”⁹ Elder Devin G. Durrant taught, “Small efforts sustained over time can produce significant results.”¹⁰ Alma taught, “By small and simple things are great things brought to pass.”¹¹

5. People Can Always Bounce Back

I believe people can always bounce back spiritually. They can overcome the consequences of poor choices. They can always return to the joy of living in harmony with Heavenly Father’s will.

Consider the account of Corianton in the Book of Mormon. He was the younger brother, standing in the shadows of Shiblon and Helaman. We don’t know his motivations—perhaps he wanted to prove himself—but he boasted in his own strength and wisdom¹² and soon made an extremely grave mistake with the harlot Isabel, not only wounding himself but undermining his father’s efforts to build faith in others.¹³ The miracle in Corianton’s life was that this self-inflicted wound was *not* a spiritually fatal one.

There may be more to the story. Corianton seemed to have been wrestling with questions and doubts. On three different occasions his father said, “I perceive that thy mind is worried.”¹⁴ Many of us feel similar worries about current social issues and may feel tension in our conflicting feelings. Alma reassured Corianton, promising that God’s “mercy claimeth the penitent.”¹⁵

Corianton changed direction. During the Amalickiahite war, the spiritual efforts of

Corianton and his brothers were compared with the war efforts of Captain Moroni.¹⁶ Alma said, “There was . . . great prosperity in the church because of . . . the word of God, which was declared unto them by Helaman, and Shiblon, and Corianton, and Ammon and his brethren.”¹⁷

Nearly ten years later, Corianton and his brothers persuaded the people of Ammon not to break their oath of peace.¹⁸ Some years after that, as the scriptures record, he and his brothers “declare[d] the word of God with much power”¹⁹ and convinced many to repent.

Sometime later, after Helaman had died, Corianton’s brother Shiblon took over the records. The scriptures say this about Shiblon: “He was a just man, and he did walk uprightly before God; and he did observe to do good continually, to keep the commandments of the Lord his God; and also did his brother.”²⁰ Note the reference to Corianton. He was on par with Shiblon.

Corianton bounced back. He let Christ save him. His is a story of hope, of putting his faith in Christ and letting himself be touched, rescued, and transformed by God’s love. As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught:

*However far from home and family and God you feel you have traveled, I testify that you have **not** traveled beyond the reach of divine love. It is not possible for you to sink lower than the infinite light of Christ’s Atonement shines.*²¹

So bounce back just as Corianton did!

6. A Smile Is Powerful

And now the last one: I believe in the power of a smile.

Some years ago I served as the bishop in my ward. It was so rewarding but also very challenging. I couldn’t stop worrying. I wondered why this special calling felt like such a burden at times, even though I constantly saw small miracles and I knew, at least intellectually, that the Lord was in charge. Still, emotionally, I couldn’t leave all the worry to Him. I didn’t know how to let go of it.

I fasted several times, asking for the Lord to take the worry away. In time He helped me

understand that the worry was evidence that I loved the people I served and that as long as I cared for them, the worry would not go away completely. Knowing this helped me live with the worry and carry the burden.

One cold winter Sunday morning I was on my way to the church. It was pitch-black. The worry and the burden and the perceived unfairness of being up so early on a cold, dark Sunday morning felt particularly heavy. I had been fasting for help. And then an answer came. Simple. My Heavenly Father said just this: “Smile!” And I did. Instantly I felt better. I felt lighter. I saw serving my ward family as a privilege. Instead of focusing on the dark, cold morning, I could focus on the bright, happy faces of those who were serving with me. Instead of thinking about the struggles people faced, I could focus on their efforts, their examples, their faith, and their progress.

Now, I realize that simply smiling may not be a universal solution. I realize many people struggle with mental and emotional challenges that require professional help. But this was an answer after I had fasted and prayed specifically about my circumstance, and I share it, hoping it might help somehow. A smile can change my outlook.

Some days I feel like the imposter scientist. But when I smile, I believe that my best work is still ahead of me, and I am not ashamed of the things I don’t know yet or even the things that I knew and then forgot.

Some days I feel my faith is weak. But when I smile, I know the opposite of faith is not doubt—the opposite of faith is certainty—and I am grateful for what I do believe.

Some days I wish I would have been a better father when I was raising my kids. But when I smile, I realize they still listen to me. And I see them as Heavenly Father sees them and believe they will continue to grow and amaze me. I see them, as my patriarchal blessing says, as “jewels in my household” and see my family as my “greatest joy.”

Some days I feel the loss—the deep loss—of three sisters taken by cystic fibrosis before they had a chance to grow up. I feel so sorry for my parents. But when I smile, I look forward to

knowing my sisters again—and knowing them better. And I revel in the nine crazy, interesting, and life-enriching siblings I am still with.

Some days I replay videos in my head of dumb things I did or unkind things I said or did, and I wonder, “How could anyone listen to me give a talk like this and not think, ‘Gus is such a hypocrite?’” But when I smile, my own weakness is the lens I need to see others clearly—to see them and love them as people like me who are a mix of good and bad traits, still trying to become the people they want to be but not quite there yet.

Some days I feel discouraged that my body is aging. I still want to improve my handball game and win the Utah state handball championship. I want to set new personal record times on my mountain-bike rides. I want to be shredded. But when I smile, I am grateful I *can* play handball, I *can* ride my mountain bike, I *can* use my hands to type, and I *can* see to read.

When I smile, I am grateful I can taste my wife’s amazing cooking and smell and see the beautiful flowers she grows in her enormous garden. I am grateful I am healthy enough to do anything my kids and grandkids do.

Circling back to the beginning:

- I believe Heavenly Father is patient.
- I believe His plans are better than my plans.
- I believe each of us has a gift: a brain that can grow and adapt. We can do something amazing with that gift.
- I believe anyone can bounce back. There is always hope.
- I believe in the power of a smile.

Finally, I believe in Heavenly Father, who loves you and me and knows us personally. I believe Jesus Christ is the Redeemer. He is the Physician who can heal and save anyone. I believe in the doctrines taught in the Bible and the Book of Mormon and those taught by modern prophets. I believe in you, in your divine potential, and in your unique mission to make the world better. Go be amazing!

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Moses 1:39.
2. Isaiah 55:8.
3. Jacob 4:8.
4. See David Epstein, *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2019), 121–28; see also Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2011).
5. See, generally, Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool, *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).
6. See Ericsson and Pool, *Peak*, 27–33, 46–47; see also Jody Rosen, “The Knowledge, London’s Legendary Taxi-Driver Test, Puts Up a Fight in the Age of GPS,” *New York Times Style Magazine*, 10 November 2014, nytimes.com/2014/11/10/t-magazine/london-taxi-test-knowledge.html. Also see Eleanor A. Maguire, David G. Gadian, Ingrid S. Johnsrude, Catriona D. Good, John Ashburner, Richard S. J. Frackowiak, and Christopher D. Frith, “Navigation-Related Structural Change in the Hippocampi of Taxi Drivers,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 97, no. 8 (11 April 2000): 4398–4403.
7. See Ericsson and Pool, *Peak*, 33–37.
8. 2 Nephi 28:30; Doctrine and Covenants 98:12; 128:21; see also Isaiah 28:10.
9. Doctrine and Covenants 64:33.
10. Devin G. Durrant, “My Heart Pondereth Them Continually,” *Ensign*, November 2015.
11. Alma 37:6.
12. See Alma 39:2.
13. See Alma 39:3–13.
14. Alma 40:1; see also Alma 41:1; Alma 42:1.
15. Alma 42:23.
16. See Alma 48:19.
17. Alma 49:30.
18. See Alma 53:14.
19. Alma 62:45.
20. Alma 63:2.
21. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Laborers in the Vineyard,” *Ensign*, May 2012; emphasis in original.