

Finding Direction in Uncertainty

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My husband, Ryan, and I were married at the beginning of our last year as undergraduates at BYU. He was intending to apply to graduate schools, and one day I timidly asked, “What if I applied too?”

His immediate response was, “Why wouldn’t you?” (Yes, we are those people who love school and can’t imagine why anyone would rather get a job than go to more school!)

This began an amazing educational journey that has led to a career I never expected to have in my life. As I look back on my journey, I see how God has been with me. However, that doesn’t mean life has been free of major challenges.

Moving Forward in Uncertainty

Today I want to talk about two things. The first is how to move forward when you don’t know what choice to make or what step to take next in your life. This situation can happen because you have too many good choices or because there appear to be no good choices.

When approaching choices with faith, I often want and expect an experience like Nephi’s when

he went to get the plates of Laban “not knowing beforehand the things which [he] should do.”¹ God led him step by step. Instead, my experience is often more like the brother of Jared’s experience when he asked how to have light in the Jaredites’ barges. God’s response was essentially, “What would ye have me do?”²

Upon embarking on graduate studies, I grappled with feelings of guilt, as if I were prioritizing personal growth over dedicating myself to nurturing my family. To me, this felt like an either-or situation. Pursuing education felt indulgent. During our graduate studies, a dilemma surfaced regarding how both my husband and I could simultaneously pursue our educations. At this juncture I had developed a profound love for statistical human genetics intertwined with biomedical informatics, yet I struggled to envision a path forward to complete my degree.

I turned to God in prayer even as I wrestled with the idea of seeking His guidance on what seemed a selfish pursuit. I expected God to kindly encourage me to let go of this pursuit and focus on my family and my husband’s education.

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There are only a few times in my life when I have experienced clear, unequivocal divine revelation, and this was one of those times. But it was not the response that I expected.

The response from my Heavenly Father was simply and boldly “Don’t quit.” While this directive was unmistakable, it left me bewildered, lacking direction in how to move forward. I pondered the adage “When one door closes, another opens,” but I didn’t see any doors that could open. Despite receiving clear divine guidance, I found myself in a dark period of my life, grappling with how to proceed without apparent avenues for progress. With fervent prayers, the prompting persisted: “Don’t quit.” This came with no additional knowledge of how to not quit.

Ryan and I sought advice from our parents, friends, other relatives, and bishop. We prayed. We went to the temple. We searched the scriptures. Over the course of a month, a couple of things took shape. Besides the prompting “Don’t quit,” Ryan and I felt drawn to the story of the brother of Jared that I mentioned earlier.

Presenting an Offering

In the book of Ether, we read that the Jaredites were directed to build barges for their journey to a new land. The brother of Jared sought divine guidance on various challenges, including how to provide light in the enclosed vessels. Despite having given specific answers for other inquiries, God asked the brother of Jared, “What will ye that I should do that ye may have light?”³

Can you imagine the burden the brother of Jared must have felt? I imagine he was overwhelmed. This was before modern electricity had even been thought of. At the time, the only light available in darkness was fire, which was not safe for an enclosed wooden barge. After much contemplation and a good deal of creative thinking, the brother of Jared “did molten out of a rock” clear stones and planned to ask the God of the universe to touch the stones and make them shine.⁴

He presented this plan to God by entreating, “Now behold, O Lord, . . . do not be angry with thy servant because of his weakness before thee.”⁵ He felt humbled trying to come up with a plan

when he knew that God could come up with a better, more effective plan. Yet God had asked him to try. And he came up with rocks and the plan to ask God to touch them and make them glow. The brother of Jared’s knowledge and skill was insufficient to do more than this. However, God’s response wasn’t disdainful or angry; rather, He immediately touched the stones to illuminate them and commended the brother of Jared for his faith.

The brother of Jared’s faith taught him something profound about God, who declared, “Ye are redeemed from the fall; therefore ye are brought back into my presence.”⁶ How remarkable! The brother of Jared’s faith in presenting his humble offering led to this outcome. It wasn’t the specific solution he proposed but the faith that prompted him to offer a solution. It was faith in God’s benevolence. While God could have performed a different miracle without the brother of Jared, He desired the brother of Jared’s growth and involvement.

After our pondering, my husband and I presented our offering to God and asked Him to direct our path. Instead of clear stones, our offering was a calendar filled with dates of me commuting between Texas and Tennessee while Ryan was in school, then both of us traveling to Tennessee on Ryan’s school breaks. We presented this offering and asked God to bless this plan so that we both would be able to continue our education and receive our degrees and, more important, so that our relationship would not suffer from all the time apart. We asked God that we, who were poor graduate students, would have the resources and fortitude to do this plan. We felt comfort that God accepted our offering and would bless it. After receiving the necessary academic approvals, we set out to follow this path.

Fast forward three years: after many, many flights and miles on our car, plus one baby, I graduated with my PhD. After three more years and one more baby, Ryan also received his PhD. God did bless our plan. Academically, we were able to excel. Our families were incredibly supportive. We had many friends in both states who helped us, whether by letting me stay with them when traveling on my own or by being willing to

develop deep friendships with someone who was out of state half of the time. Our traveling and education did not harm Ryan's and my relationship; instead, by having to communicate and sacrifice for each other's goals, our relationship became much, much stronger than if we had followed another path. God truly took our meager offering and imbued it with heavenly power.

Trusting in God

From this experience, I learned that when I feel stalled and unsure of what step to take next, I should trust God enough to choose and take a step—or, in other words, to go forward in faith. If you are living in a way that prepares you to receive personal revelation, then keep moving forward even if you do not receive a clear prompting about which path to take. Trust that God will not let you make a wrong choice without warning you.⁷ Trust that God wants you to be involved in your path. Your voice matters to Him. If you are pointed toward Him, He can walk with you no matter what career or life choices you make. Make your offering of a plan and leave it at the feet of Him who loves you and works “for your good.”⁸ He can turn your stones into miracles.

I also learned that receiving personal revelation does not mean that the path forward becomes easy. I learned that even those with the same goals do not have to take the same path to achieve them. I learned that what appears easy for one person can be challenging for another person. I learned to trust God during challenging times, and I learned that with Him I will come out better.

If we focus so much on *what* events need to happen, we will lose the more important focus of *who* we are trying to become. If we become someone with a deep relationship with our Heavenly Father, we will live with Him for eternity. Our life events and choices vary, but we should work toward goals that help us become our best selves, the people our Heavenly Father sees we have the potential to become.

President Russell M. Nelson has repeatedly stated the importance of receiving personal revelation.⁹ If I had made a choice about continuing graduate school or not based on what I thought I should do, I would have stunted my personal

growth. By choosing to commune with God, I received personal revelation that was monumental in my life. My path led me to extensive education and a career in teaching and research. As I look back over this path, I can see so many ways in which my Heavenly Father was there supporting me and guiding me when I needed it, even if, at the time, I couldn't see His influence.

Pointing to Christ

Each of you has your own path. I hope you choose one that leads you to eternal life with God, that leads you to our Savior, Jesus Christ. We read, “Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.”¹⁰ At times, I have viewed this as a small, narrow path in the middle of a wide vista leading to a far-off glimmer called eternal life, and I have feared that when I stray off the path as I inevitably make mistakes, I might lose hope of ever finding it again.

I would like to share my current internal visual that incorporates my study of the scriptures and words of the prophets. I am grateful to my mother-in-law, Mary Jeane Davis, for bringing this to life for you to see. [An art piece was shown.]

Instead of the goal of eternal life being at the end of a single path, I envision eternal life with Jesus Christ atop a mountain. Because individuals enter this life at different points and with different challenges and advantages, individuals are spread all around the mountain.

In this scenario, “strait” and “narrow” refer not to a single path that everyone needs to find and fit on; instead they refer to the possible angles of each person's trajectory that will allow them to reach the summit and Jesus Christ. Where each person stands, there is only a single, narrow angle they can face while traveling that will lead them to Jesus without missing Him. Their goal of who they will become—and with whose help—must be focused.

However, when we look over at another person, we may notice that their angle is different from ours. In these comparisons, we lose sight of the most important fact: it is not the measure of each person's angle, it is who and what we face that

matter. Jesus ministers to the one. He meets us wherever we are and shows us how to progress and return to Him.

This personal visual helps me better understand these words from President Jeffrey R. Holland:

*I do not know who in this vast audience today may need to hear the message of forgiveness . . . , but however late you think you are, however many chances you think you have missed, however many mistakes you feel you have made or talents you think you don't have, or 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.¹¹*

If you lose your focus on the center—on eternal life with Jesus Christ—you can wander off the direct path to Him. However, as soon as you pivot in place to point to Him, you are back on the path. You cannot stay lost to Him.

Learning from the Paths of Heroes in Science

That each of our paths is unique really hit home last summer as I served as a director of a new study abroad about women in the history of science. It was a phenomenal experience exploring different fields of science in many countries and learning about female scientists, including Marie Curie, Rosalind Franklin, Florence Nightingale, Mary Anning, and Emmanuelle Charpentier. I learned about more female scientists than I knew existed, and in addition to their academic achievements, I learned about their lives and their challenges. I also spent the past year reading and studying more about other influential figures in STEM, including Gregor Mendel, Antonie van Leeuwenhook, and William Henry Welch, and their lives and achievements. I have been amazed and inspired by their stories of perseverance and success.

We often refer to famous individuals as “heroes” but know little more than that they had a success that changed the world. As I dove deeper into understanding these scientists’ backgrounds and what challenges they faced prior to the achievements we know them for, I became even more inspired.

Florence Nightingale is well-known for her work as a nurse. Indeed, she revolutionized the nursing field. In studying her life, I learned that from the time she was a teenager, she felt called to God’s service by serving others as a nurse. Even with this passion, she did not have the opportunity to receive nursing training for twenty years—as long as many of you have been alive. Once she finally realized her dream of becoming a nurse, she struggled to find positions that would allow her to use her skills. She worked hard at whatever she was allowed to do within hospitals and used what she knew of cleanliness and infection to improve her surroundings. Within a few years, she was asked to bring nurses and serve in the Crimean War, during which she became known as the “Lady of the Lamp.” She was instrumental in changing how field hospitals were set up and run, as well as in changing nurses’ roles in the medical field.

During that time, she contracted a chronic illness—likely brucellosis—that impacted her health for the rest of her life, preventing her from continuing to work as a nurse. Can you imagine? After waiting twenty years to realize her dream, a side effect from her service prevented her from working as a nurse for the last several decades of her life. Her path had unexpected challenges. Imagine finding that ravine in front of you after ascending a steep portion of your mountain.

Yet Nightingale still found ways to follow her passion to serve others. She believed strongly that all individuals—not just those trained to work in a hospital—should have a basic working knowledge of nursing. She wrote and published dozens of books and pamphlets for those taking care of individuals at home, including *Notes on Nursing* (1859). She analyzed data from wars and hospitals and published results from her statistical analyses that finally convinced many that more people were killed in war by infections than from combat wounds. With her faith in God and His help, her work as a nurse did not end just because she couldn’t do what she had anticipated doing. Instead, her publications helped many more than she could have imagined.¹²

Gregor Mendel, a monk who lived in the 1800s, is known as the father of modern genetics.

As I learned more about his life during this past year, I was amazed to learn that being a monk was not his first choice of occupation. He had a strong desire to be a teacher. However, he had severe anxiety and was not able to pass the teaching exam in Germany either of the times he took it. After the second time, he returned dejectedly to his monastery and gave up hope of this profession.

While a monk, he spent years growing thousands of pea plants and making records. For many of us, our first introduction to genetics is learning about Mendel's work on pea plants. He conducted meticulous experiments by crossing pea plants and recording characteristics such as flower color, pea color, and pea shape, among others. This allowed him to deduce inheritance patterns, specifically dominant and recessive traits. After decades, he published this monumental work.¹³

And then, nothing. Hardly anyone read it. It was lost to the dusty bins of scientific publications. It wasn't until decades later, after his death, that Mendel's work was rediscovered and these worldview-changing discoveries circled the globe. Whereas Florence Nightingale realized her dream of being a nurse, Mendel never became a teacher. Yet God was able to touch Mendel's efforts and use them to bless the world. Even though Mendel is a hero and someone I look up to as a scientist who used precise methods with amazing patience, he never saw the impact he made on the world.¹⁴

Turning Stones into Miracles

As an undergraduate, I was trained to perform laboratory tests on patient samples to aid in the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of diseases. I loved the medical laboratory science (MLS) major, but I felt that I had given up that path when I went to graduate school in human genetics. Interestingly, my certification became relevant again when I returned to BYU as a faculty member to teach in the MLS program. It became even more relevant a few years ago.

My fourth daughter was born at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic after a brutal pregnancy. There were months when the most I could do each day was move from the bed to the couch.

This time was a deep valley in my life because of my physical health. It was hard to imagine anything good coming in the future. Gratefully, my daughter was born healthy—just very tiny—and I recovered.

The following semester in my clinical microbiology course, we were discussing COVID-19. Molecular testing for COVID-19 is performed by medical laboratory scientists, and the demand for these scientists was very high. Many in the profession were working multiple jobs to help with the need. My husband and I had considered my working a second job at a hospital to relieve pressure on hospital personnel during the pandemic. However, one student in class asked, "How can we as an MLS program help at BYU?" That helped me consider how we could help the BYU community specifically.

The MLS faculty reached out to university administration and offered to help any way we could. This resulted in a phenomenal experience for the MLS students and faculty. We were able to work with the BYU Student Health Center to start a CLIA-approved high-complexity laboratory for PCR testing of COVID-19. This laboratory was managed by certified MLS faculty, but the bulk of the work was performed by students in the MLS program. During peak time, we performed hundreds of tests a day at the Student Health Center. While this resulted in extra work for each of us, it was a reminder to me to not assume that there are specific end points to parts of my life. God took stones in my life that I had forgotten about and turned them into miracles.

Avoiding Comparisons

As we move along our paths in life, we don't know when there will be ravines or steep cliffs. Some of our challenges may be similar to those of others; some may be distinct. We can learn from the ways in which others have surmounted the challenges in their paths, but encountering our own challenges can seem lonely and may require techniques and skills unique to our path and challenges. Do not let comparison of your path to others' paths diminish the strength and courage it takes you to press forward.

The second thought I would like to share is to not compare your own path to others, both for their benefit and for yours.

Hopefully, the goal for each of us is to return to our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. How close someone appears to be to the summit of a mountain or how easy someone's path looks can be deceptive. Some have huge challenges that are visible to all, and some have a path that is always at an incline and appears easy but never provides a plateau for a time of rest. It is not worth my time or your time to judge the difficulty of another's path or to judge if they are as far as they should be. We do not have the right angle of perception to make an accurate judgment, and we gain no benefit by judging others. We also gain no benefit by making ourselves feel small because we don't appear to be as far down our path as others are down theirs. Please remember: it does not matter where on the path you are, only that you are on the path.

We will each fail at scaling the mountain on our own. We do not have sufficient ability to do it. This is why the Atonement of Jesus Christ is necessary and is such a precious gift. It is also why we do not need to worry about where we are on the path, only that we are pointing to Jesus Christ. If we are, His Atonement is sufficient to assist each of us in pressing forward regardless of the challenges and to compensate for when we make mistakes and stumble off the path. Please trust Him. Trust Him enough to focus on Him no matter how slow or backward your progress may feel. Allow those He puts in your path to help you as He would.

There are many good things in this life. There are many things we can do and goals we can attain that improve us and help us become better people. However, to truly receive eternal life and reach the highest summit, we require Jesus Christ. Do not allow goals—no matter how good—to cause you to adjust your position away from Jesus Christ. For me, focusing on my husband's education was a good goal, but to do that at the exclusion of my own education would have led me from my path.

Relying on the Atonement of Christ

I would like to share another of the challenges I have faced in my life. I started as faculty at BYU

when I had one daughter at home and was expecting a second daughter. The first few years as faculty are grueling and overwhelming—at least they were for me. When my second daughter was several months old, I was struggling. I felt numb. It was hard to feel any emotion, especially hope. At this time, I continued pushing to do the things I knew helped me be the best I could be. I kept praying, even though I didn't feel much response. I kept reading my scriptures, even though I didn't feel anything. One day I was reading Nephi's psalm,¹⁵ and a section of it stood out to me:

Awake, my soul! No longer droop in sin. Rejoice, O my heart, and give place no more for the enemy of my soul.

Do not anger again because of mine enemies. Do not slacken my strength because of mine afflictions.

Rejoice, O my heart, and cry unto the Lord, and say: O Lord, I will praise thee forever; yea, my soul will rejoice in thee, my God, and the rock of my salvation.¹⁶

When I read this, I didn't feel a connection. I didn't feel the Spirit. But I remember thinking intellectually, "Hmm, I should feel a connection to this. This seems like what I want to happen to me. I want my soul to feel awake. I don't want to be burdened. Why can I not connect?"

I wrote the verses that I wanted to feel and put them on my cookbook stand in the kitchen. In hindsight, I can see this as a toehold the Savior created to help me scale this seemingly insurmountable cliff. At the time, all I could do was encourage myself to look at the toehold. I couldn't attempt to use it. For months I would read these words in my kitchen, sometimes in casual passing, sometimes forcing myself to focus on them. During this time, I also met with my doctor, was diagnosed with postpartum depression, and started treatment.

Over time, this plea of Nephi's became my plea. I was able to use this toehold, this connection to my Savior, and I slowly started to make the same heartfelt plea for my soul to awake. Eventually, these verses became precious to me, and I felt them in my soul. As I read them now, years later, they are a reminder to me that my Heavenly Father didn't forget me. At a time when I couldn't feel or hear His Spirit, He used another part of my

brain—a clinical, logical part—to help me identify a scriptural passage that I could work toward feeling a connection with. When I couldn't come up with hope myself, He gave me Nephi's words to use as my goal.

There are many challenges in our lives. Some come from our choices, but many come from circumstances outside of our control. Our current bodies are mortal and have mortal limitations, many that we are born with. I mentioned Gregor Mendel and his work on dominant and recessive traits, now known as Mendelian genetics. My research focuses on complex traits with non-Mendelian genetics, meaning that a single gene or genetic variant isn't enough to determine a trait or disease. Sometimes hundreds of genetic variants can increase the risk of an individual having certain traits. We now know that complex traits such as autoimmune diseases, depression, heart disease, and dementia are influenced by large combinations of genetic variants. There are also many studies that have found genetic associations with things we consider personality traits, such as aggression¹⁷ and attention spans.¹⁸

As I research and learn more about genetics, there are three specific ways this overwhelming amount of information about how the body works—and awareness of how much we don't understand of genetics—has strengthened my testimony of my Savior, Jesus Christ.

1. Understanding the Significance of the Infinite Atonement of Jesus Christ

I better understand the importance of an infinite Atonement and individualized judgment. Due to our genetic makeup and life circumstances, actions vary in difficulty for each person. The Savior's Atonement allows for personalized judgment rather than blanket consequences for all.

2. Feeling Gratitude for the Savior's Atonement and Liberation from Judgment

I am thankful I don't have to judge others in the Final Judgment. Actions have consequences, and we need social structures and laws to enact those consequences to keep others safe. But these systems don't have the ability to gauge genuine

repentance or change, which is necessary for eternal judgment. I am deeply thankful that my Savior experienced every failing and shortcoming in His Atonement, enabling Him to comprehend the struggles and efforts of individuals. I am grateful that I am not tasked with carrying this burden, which also liberates me from the need to judge others during my time on earth. I don't need to judge if others are on the right path or if they are working hard enough. My job is to do as God commands—to love them.

3. Embracing Self-Kindness and Celebrating Personal Growth

I have learned to be kinder to and less judgmental of myself. Rather than fixating on my perceived bad habits, I recognize that my innate tendencies may differ from others'. I am prioritizing encouraging myself for my achievements rather than dwelling on my shortcomings.

Taking Your Own Path

I have a testimony of my Savior. I have a testimony of my Heavenly Father's love for me as His daughter. I believe in His love for each of you, individually, right where you are. I believe you each have a path back to our Heavenly Father. You cannot stray so far that a single step cannot help you face Him again. Facing Him and focusing on Him does not mean your life will be easy. It does not mean challenges will disappear or they won't be there again. It does mean that you will have guaranteed success in attaining your goal of eternal life and living with your Heavenly Father and your loved ones again. How far you feel you are on the path is not the goal—that you are on the path is enough. Trust in the Savior to take care of the distance. Don't give up.

Do not become blinded by common solutions. Be creative in identifying ways to press through or across your challenges. When struggling with postpartum depression, I asked to serve in the nursery. My bishop was surprised. But once I began serving in nursery, I suddenly wanted to be at church—those little children needed me. They often weren't old enough to talk, so I didn't have to worry about carrying on conversations. I could just go and be who I was at that moment

and receive the gift of love from little ones in the form of a smile or a hug or sometimes a half-eaten Goldfish cracker.

Be creative in making your plan to move forward. Make an offering of your rocks to the Lord. Trust Him to touch them and turn your offering into a miracle.

I am grateful to be here with you today. Please know that each of you is loved. You each have your own path. And you have a lot of people rooting for you and cheering for you: your Savior, your Heavenly Father, and those around you, including your professors. I am grateful to be one of those who can be here to cheer you on and support you. I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. 1 Nephi 4:6.
2. See Ether 2:23–25.
3. Ether 2:23.
4. Ether 3:1; see also verse 4.
5. Ether 3:2.
6. Ether 3:13.
7. See Boyd K. Packer, “How to Survive in Enemy Territory,” Seminary Centennial Broadcast, 22 January 2012, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/watch/seminary-centennial-broadcast/2012/01?lang=eng&vid=1414473431001; see also Packer, “The Message: How to Survive in Enemy Territory,” *New Era*, April 2012.
8. Doctrine and Covenants 111:11.
9. See, for example, Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” *Ensign*, May 2018.
10. Matthew 7:14; see also verse 13.
11. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Laborers in the Vineyard,” *Ensign*, May 2012; emphasis in original.
12. For additional information, see “Florence Nightingale Biography,” Florence Nightingale Museum, florence-nightingale.co.uk/florence-nightingale-biography; see also Kerri Lee Alexander, “Florence Nightingale,” National Women’s History Museum, 2019, womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/florence-nightingale.
13. See Scott Abbott and Daniel J. Fairbanks, “Experiments on Plant Hybrids by Gregor Mendel,” *Genetics* 204, no. 2 (October 2016): 407–22.
14. For additional information, see Siddhartha Mukherjee, *The Gene: An Intimate History* (New York: Scribner, 2016), 17–19, 47–55; see also Daniel L. Hartl, “Gregor Johann Mendel: From Peasant to Priest, Pedagogue, and Prelate,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 119, no. 30 (26 July 2022): e2121953119.
15. See Sidney B. Sperry, *Our Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Stevens and Wallis, 1947), 110–11.
16. 2 Nephi 4:28–30.
17. See Veronika V. Odintsova, Fiona A. Hagenbeek, Camiel M. Van der Lann, Steve Van de Weijer, and Dorret I. Boomsma, “Genetics and Epigenetics of Human Aggression,” in *Brain and Crime*, ed. Hanna Swaab and Gerben Meynen, vol. 197, *Handbook of Clinical Neurology*, 3rd series, ed. Michael J. Aminoff, François Boller, and Dick F. Swaab (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2023), 13–44.
18. See Ditte Demontis et al., “Genome-Wide Analyses of ADHD Identify 27 Risk Loci, Refine the Genetic Architecture and Implicate Several Cognitive Domains,” *Nature Genetics* 55, no. 2 (February 2023): 198–208.