

Look for the Light

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I heard many great talks last April at general conference, but one that stood out to me was Elder Alexander Dushku’s talk entitled “Pillars and Rays.” He said that some of us might worry that we have not had an overwhelming spiritual experience, such as seeing a pillar of light as the teenage Joseph Smith did when he prayed in a grove of trees. Elder Dushku recounted that he, like most of us, had not seen a pillar of light; instead, the Lord had sent him “a ray of light, and then another, and another.”¹ His testimony is composed of rays of light gathered over time.

This incremental gathering or growing of a testimony over time rang true to me, and I began to think about my own life. Similar to Elder Dushku, I have not seen a pillar of light, but there have been many rays. Today I want to tell you about some of the rays of light that I have experienced, and I hope that this might encourage you to reflect on the rays of light in your own lives.

The Light of Learning a Language

I have had more time to gather rays than most of you, and I can tell you that sometimes we may

not realize the significance of those rays until many years later. After I was asked to give this devotional, I thought back to when I was a university student. I didn’t go to BYU. I attended the rival university up north near where I grew up, and I was studying to be a teacher. I was living at home and commuting to campus, which meant that sometimes I rode the bus. At the time, I was not going to church regularly. My parents didn’t attend. My mother, who grew up in Norway, wasn’t a member, and my father had not gone to church since he had returned from World War II. But I had gone to Primary as a child, and those Primary songs had made a lasting impression. As I grew into adulthood, I returned to church.

One particular day as I was sitting in the back of an almost empty bus, something very unusual happened. I felt as if someone tapped me on the shoulder and forcefully said, “Go on a mission!”

My first thought was “What?” and then, “I can’t go on a mission!”

The thought had never entered my mind. Back then, young women did not often serve missions, and taking time off from my education had not

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occurred to me. My nonmember mother was *not* happy about the idea. There were four children in our family, and when most of us eventually served missions, she would grumble to her friends, “I tell them not to go, but they rebel.”

I did follow that prompting, and I was called to serve in Taiwan, which meant that I needed to learn Mandarin Chinese. I had heard that missionaries were able to miraculously learn languages because they received the gift of tongues, so I wasn’t very worried, but I had no idea how much time and effort would be required to make that gift of tongues manifest.

After I arrived in Taiwan, I felt that I was in a strange, foreign place where I couldn’t understand anyone and they couldn’t understand me. I wondered if I would ever become an effective missionary. How would I communicate with the people of Taiwan if I couldn’t learn the language?

Over time I became despondent and depressed. To keep my spirits up, I remember singing Primary songs and hymns to myself whenever I rode my bike to appointments. I worked hard, kept the commandments, and tried my best, but not much happened. As time went on, I became more and more disheartened. I thought about my experience on the bus and wondered if someone had made a mistake sending me to Taiwan.

After I had been serving for about six months, the mission was split, and I was called to be a senior companion. I couldn’t believe that this had happened! Up to that point, my senior companion was doing almost all the talking and teaching. I was too afraid to say much, even after I had memorized many discussions, which was what missionaries did back then.

After I became a senior companion, I had to speak up and actually use my language to communicate, and this meant that I made many mistakes. But as I actively used the language to talk with people, it slowly began to stick. Little by little, as I did my part and Heavenly Father did His part, I began to understand people, and they began to understand me. I felt God working through me despite my weaknesses and mistakes because the work needed to get done and my junior companion and I were all He had at that moment in that small town in Taiwan.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell has said, “‘Mighty’ changing . . . is mighty hard work”²—and I could add that it can take a mighty long time. I didn’t expect my mission experience to be so hard. I didn’t expect the discouragement. I didn’t expect the feelings of incompetence. I expected a pillar of light and an instant gift of tongues; instead, I got many small rays over time.

My mother ended up becoming my greatest supporter, despite her opposition to my mission. She wrote every week and shared her experiences of moving to America as a young woman and eventually learning English in spite of being very homesick and discouraged. She told me that my consistent efforts to use Chinese would eventually pay off. I don’t know what I would have done without my mother’s encouragement.

I think back to the rays of light I found on my mission and how they fit into my life today. Because of that experience, “I became very curious about the language learning process and the best methods for teaching a second or foreign language.” I became interested in learning about what happens in the brain when we learn a new language. I wondered why we can effortlessly learn languages when we are young but find it difficult to master a new language when we are older.

Today, as a language researcher, I have the wonderful opportunity to empirically investigate some of these questions. Recently the BYU College of Humanities opened a language sciences laboratory in which we can explore questions about the bilingual or multilingual brain. Did you know that we can use electroencephalography (a procedure that measures electrical activity in the brain) to investigate brain waves that indicate whether a person can recognize or understand words or sentences or if they can distinguish a grammatical error? We can use imaging to explore how the brain is activated during different language tasks, and we can identify brain networks and how various areas of the brain work together to learn language. In addition, we can investigate the effects of age and language proficiency on those brain networks. I often wonder how my brain changed from before my mission to after, but, most importantly, I know that my heart and spirit were forever changed because of my missionary experience.

I feel tremendously blessed to be here at BYU, which is recognized as the “language university.” Currently I work with amazing colleagues and students at the dynamic Center for Language Studies, also in the College of Humanities. I think that I may have the best job on campus, as I have the honor and privilege of supervising more than sixty less commonly taught languages (LCTLs), or languages not frequently taught in American universities. BYU offers a total of eighty-four languages—more than any other university in the country.³ President Spencer W. Kimball, in his address “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” predicted that BYU would one day be a center of language learning,⁴ and that has definitely come to pass! We currently teach Samoan, Tagalog, Hindi, Amharic, Swahili, Mongolian, Hmong, K’iche’, Navajo, and ASL, to name only a few. This fall we will add Twi, which is an indigenous language spoken in Ghana.

I have the privilege of working with truly amazing and inspiring teachers. Many of them have been pioneering members of the Church, opening up missions and branches in their home countries or translating the Book of Mormon and other Church materials. Some of them have worked to get the Church recognized in their home countries and have collaborated with government officials. Many of these officials have visited BYU and our language classes. Recently we welcomed dignitaries from Azerbaijan, Mongolia, and Vietnam—and even the president of the small island country of Kiribati.

Our professors are passionate about teaching and are working to connect students with languages and cultures and to lifelong learning, particularly during challenging times. Following the invasion of Ukraine, our Ukrainian professor worked with her students to create and distribute information about what was happening on the ground in Ukraine. The students also raised thousands of dollars to provide aid and support for refugee mothers and children. Most recently our Haitian Creole professor has raised awareness among students and faculty about the current state of crisis in Haiti. He is also an advisor for the Haitian Creole Student Association here at BYU and a support to the local Haitian community.

The students in our language classes learn about past and current world events and acquire a sensitivity and knowledge about cultures very different from their own. I sometimes feel as if I belong to a mini United Nations here at BYU! We try to follow the exhortation in Doctrine and Covenants 90:15 to “become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people.”

The Light of Small Teaching

In the BYU College of Humanities, we regularly host a meeting with the Language Acquisition Research Colloquium in which language professors and graduate students gather to reflect on and discuss language acquisition and teaching. Recently we read and reviewed a book called *Small Teaching*, written by James M. Lang. Just as Elder Dushku has suggested gathering rays, this author has encouraged teachers to make small, consistent changes based on solid teaching principles.⁵ Over time, the implementation of incremental, effective, and manageable teaching procedures can result in large learning gains.

I have started applying *Small Teaching* to my own life, but I call it “small learning.” I don’t think that we value small learning enough because we expect big outcomes, and we expect them right away—just like that pillar of light Elder Dushku talked about. We may not pay enough attention to incremental learning, and those rays can sometimes go under the radar. I hope that we will notice the rays even when we are distracted by our busy lives, especially at times when we are disappointed and discouraged or have gospel questions and doubts. I hope that we will strive to keep the commandments as we search for light, as that commitment can keep the channels open. Furthermore, I hope that we will be patient when the small learning takes a twist or turn that we don’t understand. When we reflect back, we will see that we were making progress.

For many years, my husband and I lived with our family in Hong Kong. At one point I applied for a job as a teacher at the American international school. I believed that I was well qualified for the job, but I didn’t get it. Instead, one of my friends was offered the position. I tried to be happy for my friend, but I was deeply disappointed. Many

months later, the vice principal told me that the main reason I wasn't hired was because I was a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

I fumed about this disappointment for months. Then I heard about a new international school that was opening in Hong Kong. It was an orthodox Jewish school that taught students in English, Hebrew, and Chinese—and they had no problem hiring me. I loved working at this school, and I learned a lot about Jewish customs and rituals.

One day I unexpectedly met a well-known visiting professor from the University of British Columbia. She was Jewish, and she took an interest in working with the teachers at this small school each time she visited Hong Kong. I learned that she had formed a partnership with many language educators in China and was working with them to implement the well-accepted Canadian immersion model in English immersion programs in several Chinese cities. Basically, the elementary students had about half their day in English and the other half in Chinese. This was a new concept in language teaching in China.

I had recently enrolled as a graduate student at Hong Kong University and was looking for a research topic; this professor was looking for someone who spoke Chinese who could collect data about the fledgling English immersion programs. Meeting this professor ultimately changed my life. I began working in immersion language education, and when my family relocated to Utah, I started working with Chinese immersion programs here. Research has shown that dual language immersion (DLI) is the most successful way to teach students a second language. Now I have the privilege of training wonderful BYU students who want to become DLI teachers, and it has become a major focus of research for me and my graduate students.

I think back to how angry and upset I was about not getting the teaching job at the American school in Hong Kong, but I am so grateful that they didn't hire me—even if it was because I am a member of the Church. My life took an amazing turn as a result. We don't always know where our experiences—the small learning—will take us. Over time we will detect a pattern, and we will

see God's hand in our lives. The scriptures teach us that, eventually, “all things work together for good to them that love God” (Romans 8:28). We must trust Him and do our best, collecting small rays as we go. We must keep our covenants, even when things don't seem to be going the way we want. Eventually, understanding and learning will come in the best way for each of us.

When I reflect on small learning that can lead to big learning, I think back to a wonderful opportunity I had to serve with the Church Literacy Working Group. This is a group of professionals and expert volunteers who are tasked with designing literacy materials and services for Church members who are limited in their ability to read and write in the language of opportunity in their area. The majority of these members are women who have never attended school or who have had only a few years of primary school. Currently, four languages have been targeted where there is the most need: English, Spanish, Portuguese, and French. Portuguese and French are especially important for countries in Africa such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique.

I collaborated with the English group, and much of the group's work is centered in West African countries such as Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Nigeria. Many Church members there can't read their scriptures, a lesson manual, a conference talk, or even hymn lyrics in any language. These members may feel that they can't contribute and may eventually stop coming to church. In response, a new literacy program was designed to be used during Sunday School. It involves a lot of small teaching and small learning and is called the Gospel Literacy program. These members are learning to read the letters, sounds, and words of the gospel, but I want to tell you that they are already experts in the language of the Spirit.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to travel to West Africa to help evaluate the Gospel Literacy program, and I was deeply impressed with the incredible, strong, beautiful testimonies of these members. I'd like to show a short video clip about the Gospel Literacy program in Africa. I love that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints cares deeply about its members and

their education and literacy. [A video was shown highlighting ward and stake literacy specialists and ministering sisters from Ghana who used the Gospel Literacy program to help other sisters learn to read.]

A few years ago, one of my relatives compiled a beautiful history about my father's ancestors, and I learned for the first time about my great-great-grandfather Robert Shipley. He was illiterate, illegitimate, and raised in a British workhouse. He was put in the workhouse with his younger brother, who later died because the conditions were so terrible. Their story reminds me of a Charles Dickens novel.

Fortunately, Robert survived. When he was older, he happened to learn about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. After he was baptized, he regularly attended church and eventually met a young woman there. Her name was Harriet, and she was educated and very cultured. I don't know what she saw in Robert, but they got married right before they boarded a ship to sail to America to join the Saints.

While they were aboard the ship, Harriet taught Robert to read and write, using the Book of Mormon and the Bible. I take great delight in thinking about Harriet—who was thirteen years younger—teaching Robert to recognize the letters, sounds, and words of the gospel. I know that his progress would have been slow and incremental and that it would have taken a long time to see improvements. But with persistence and patience, we know “that by small and simple things are great things brought to pass” (Alma 37:6). This is the doctrine of incremental growth. Just as with the Saints in Africa who are learning to read and write, my ancestor Robert was already proficient in the most important language—the language of the Spirit.

The Light After Loss

The language of the Spirit can also come in an incremental way, and sometimes that process can be a difficult struggle. When our family lived in Hong Kong, my daughter Erica was turning four years old. When I walked into her room on the morning of her birthday, she was wide-awake and lying quietly on her bed. When I got closer, she

said to me, “Mom, I’m no bigger than yesterday, and my hair is not any longer!”

My daughter was very distraught because she thought that when she woke up on the morning of her birthday she would instantly be a year bigger. I was trying very hard not to laugh as I explained to her that the growing doesn't take place all at once—it happens a little bit at a time and is barely noticeable. But Erica was having a hard time grasping the concept of small growing. There have been times in my life when I have had a hard time with that concept too.

Erica eventually grew into a beautiful and amazing young woman—and, yes, she always had long hair. I clung to that sweet birthday memory when, thirteen years later, our family had to endure losing her when she was killed in a car accident. She was a new university student, like many of you, and had just started taking classes. One day as she was driving on the freeway, she lost control of her car; unfortunately, she had neglected to fasten her seat belt.

I felt as if a nuclear bomb had gone off in my life. She was my youngest child, and she had been so full of life and potential. How could she be gone? My heart was truly broken. How could I go on living? How could I endure the constant anguish? It made it hard to breathe. It made it hard to do the most basic things. I wanted to stay in bed all day. I wanted the world to stop.

Erica passed away many years ago. Now, when I look back on that wrenching time of grief when I struggled to feel my Savior's love, I can find some grace in that terrible experience. A friend of mine said something to me shortly after Erica died. He told me to look for “tender mercies”⁶ from our Heavenly Father and promised me that they would come if I would open myself up to receiving them. He was telling me about the rays of light that Elder Dushku spoke about in his conference talk. He was telling me about small learning.

I listened to him and opened up my broken heart. And those rays of light did come to me as I walked through that dark valley of shadow and death. It took a long time—much longer than I expected—and it was the hardest learning that I have ever done, but eventually I emerged with a knowledge that the Savior understands my

sorrows and struggles and that He loves me and my daughter. He brought peace and comfort that soothed my heart and soul. He blessed me with His Spirit and the knowledge that I will be with Erica again. He surrounded me with rays of light that I have learned to recognize and gather into a glorious, brilliant pillar. In the darkness and despair, God’s light and love encircled me.

After Erica’s death, I found a beautiful poem that she had written years before entitled “Hope,” which centered around finding hope during dark times. The last line of that poem says, “Just hang on to the light and don’t let go for anything!”⁷ I believe that was a message for me.

Conclusion

I am grateful to the people who have shared their light with me and with others: my mother, who supported me on my mission even when she was opposed to my going; the Jewish professor from Canada who became an unlikely mentor; the ministering sisters from Ghana who helped another sister learn to read; my great-great-grandmother Harriet, who taught my great-great-grandfather; and my daughter, who died young but left behind precious words that I will always treasure. We can find light in unexpected places and from unexpected people. We are all learning together.

Elder Dushku recounted in his talk:

As we recognize, remember, and gather these rays “together in one,” something wonderful and powerful begins to happen. “Light cleaveth unto light”—“truth embraceth truth.” The reality and power of one ray of testimony reinforces and combines with another, and then another, and another. Line upon line, precept upon precept, here a ray and there a ray—one small, treasured spiritual moment at a time—there grows up within us a core of light-filled, spiritual experiences.⁸

We have the choice to open ourselves up to incremental light or incremental darkness. Heavenly Father wants us to look for the light and continue on when it is difficult, even when it takes a long time. He wants us to be patient and adopt a growth mindset. Let’s trust in the process. Let’s accept the struggle even when it is

harder than we expected. How we react to that struggle determines how much we will learn and grow. Small consistent choices and actions over a lifetime are what make you who you will become.

I hope that one day you will look back in amazement at the small and simple actions, lessons, and good habits that helped you go forward in faith. Sometimes that might mean making a correction and going through the process of repentance. That is all right—it is all part of the growing. Mistakes and failures are also an important part of the growing, as long as we learn from them—that is the key. Little by little, our Heavenly Father can turn our weaknesses into strengths.

I promise that one day you will be able to gather all those rays into a bright pillar of light that will warm your heart and sweeten your life with meaning and joy. I know that you are here at BYU to do some big learning, but don’t discount the small and simple things: they have great power over time. I pray that each one of you will step out in faith and make the important small choices every day that will, over a lifetime, surround you with learning and love. You are just beginning your journey. Bear up, be strong, and look for the rays of light. And then, “Just hang on to the light and don’t let go for anything!” In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Alexander Dushku, “Pillars and Rays,” *Liahona*, May 2024.
2. Neal A. Maxwell, “Encircled in the Arms of His Love,” *Ensign*, November 2002; referring to the phrase “mighty change” in Mosiah 5:2; Alma 5:12–14.
3. The BYU Center for Language Studies currently offers classes on sixty-two different languages—with some classes only offered when sufficient demand exists. There are twenty-two languages hosted by other departments and offered outside of the center, making a total of eighty-four languages taught at BYU. Official counts for the number of language courses offered at other American universities are difficult to ascertain but are purported to be fewer than eighty, according to data gathered by Dave

Nielsen, BYU instructional programs and language assessment coordinator.

4. President Spencer W. Kimball said:

One peak of educational excellence that is highly relevant to the needs of the Church is the realm of language. BYU should become the acknowledged language capital of the world. ["The Second Century of Brigham Young University," BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975]

5. See James M. Lang, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016).

6. 1 Nephi 1:20.

7. Erica Knell, "Hope," in Ellen Knell, *A Heart Revised: Letters of Loss and Love to My Daughter* (Provo: BYU Bookstore, 2014), 14.

8. Dushku, "Pillars and Rays"; quoting Ephesians 1:10; Doctrine and Covenants 88:40; see 2 Nephi 28:30.