

“Into the Burn!”

Val Jo Anderson

I grew up on a small farm in Sanpete County, Utah, about seventy miles south of Provo. As I have reviewed my life, I have recognized the Lord’s guidance and perhaps even intervention that has directed me onto paths I would never have thought to pursue myself. From a very young age I knew what I wanted to be when I grew up.

My grandfather owned the local sawmill and logged his own trees. As a little boy, I often went with him to the mountain. We would be logging trees, and quite often a green truck would pull up on the ridgeline and just sit there for a while. Being curious, I asked Grandpa who they were. He told me that they were forest rangers, upon which I asked what they did.

Grandpa said, “They drive around the forest in their green trucks and watch other people work.”

I immediately knew what I wanted to be. It was a revelatory kind of experience! From that time right on through college, I worked hard to be a good student, and, nearing the end of my Bachelor’s degree, could almost feel the relaxing seat of my new green truck. But God had other plans for me, because, just before I graduated, He let Ronald Reagan get elected to be president. One of Reagan’s first actions was to freeze all

federal hiring. So, no forest ranger job—and no green truck—for me.

I continued into a master’s program doing research in North Africa and then went on to a Ph.D. program in another foreign place: Texas! Before I had finished there, I was hired here at BYU, and I thank God for His caring enough to guide my path here. BYU is a wonderful place to work and learn, and in my early life I would never have been able to dream of this job that has given me and my family so many wonderful opportunities. The only bad thing was that I had to buy my own green truck, but I still do get to watch other people work. They’re called students: grads and undergrads!

We all have to be taught, and we all have to learn. I have heard it said that there are three kinds of learners:

1. Nonlearners make the same mistake time after time, seeming to never learn.
2. Experience learners make the mistake once and learn from it—never to make the same mistake again.

Val Jo Anderson was chair of the BYU Department of Plant and Wildlife Sciences when this devotional address was given on 21 June 2011.

3. Then there are observational learners—those who observe the consequences of others making the mistake and learn from that, never having to make the mistake themselves.

While we all fall into each of these categories with some things, by nature I fit the middle category. Growing up, I was a learn-by-doing kind of kid. Among other family chores was the twice-daily milking of our small herd of Jersey cows. We milked by hand, and, as I was the baby of the family and too small to milk, my assignment was to herd the cows in and out of the barn and then clean the milk-barn floors at the end of each milking session. It seemed as if those cows would save up all night so that they could relieve themselves on my shiny, clean floor.

Being an observant child, I noticed that before they made their green deposits, they always lifted their tails. That signal gave me the best idea. I would stand by with my large aluminum scoop shovel, and when the tail went up, the scoop went under, and I caught the prize before it had a chance to splatter all over the milk-barn floor.

My dad, seemingly amused and unimpressed by my creativity, said, “Son, I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

I thought to myself, “Yeah, sure, but you don’t have to clean up this mess every day.”

So I chose to ignore him, and he allowed it. A couple of days later, after nearly total and very satisfying success, the tail went up and the scoop went under and midway through the event the cow gave a great cough. Now, at my age and stature, I had a birds-eye view of this fine part of the cow’s anatomy, and that cough sent a spray of pasty, green liquid that covered me from head to toe. I stood there mortified.

My dad came over laughing and wiped the outline of first one eye and then the other and simply said, “I told you not to do that.”

It was my first lesson of “lean not unto thine own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5). It was

a lesson I would have liked to learn through obedience and trust.

Another great lesson was learned when as a young man of eighteen I took a summer job with the U.S. Forest Service. One of our duties was to be part of a twenty-man fire crew that could be called out from time to time to fight wildfires. Earlier, a wildfire had claimed the lives of four firefighters when in a panic they failed to follow the direction of their crew boss and tried to outrun an unexpected and fierce advance of a fire. The shockwaves of that incident were felt all around the region, and rigorous training ensued. Following the command of the crew boss without question or hesitation was given particular emphasis.

We fought several fires that season, and then, late in August, our crew was called out to fight a wildfire in Southern California. This was a large fire that had many crews dispatched to fight it. Our crew, along with two other crews, was assigned a sector of the fire. It was a chaparral brush fire that had a tremendously fine fuel load of dried grasses and weeds in the understory. We were obliged to make a two-mile hike from the nearest road through the brush to where the fire was burning.

It was not a particularly intense blaze, and we were to build black line—a fire line right against the burning edge of the fire. As our three twenty-man crews, marching single file through the brush, approached the fire, the sector boss suddenly appeared on a nearby ridgeline. His urgent command was to become indelibly impressed upon my mind. His voice screamed through our radios, “She’s blowing up, she’s blowing up! Into the burn!”

My pulse raced and my heart sank as I watched the small campfire-type flames, fanned on by an intense wind shift, transform into a raging inferno racing directly toward us. The command “Into the burn!” meant that we would charge through the fire and into the area where the fire had consumed the fuel.

My instinctive impulse was to turn and run, and I could see others considering that option. Our crew boss, without hesitation, reiterated the command “Into the burn!” and though it did not seem the intuitive thing to do, my training and my memory of the tragic earlier deaths compelled me to follow my leader through that wall of fire. On the other side we found a blackened moonscape where the fire could not return. With eyes and lungs burning from the heat in the whirling smoke and ash, we resorted to dancing on the top of hot rocks to protect our feet from the searing deep ash. We had made the right decision and were preserved.

After about thirty minutes the wind died down, and we were able to cross back out of the burn and begin our black line. That was an intense lesson that helped me to understand the importance of knowing in advance who you should trust and follow without hesitation, especially when the correct choice may be obscured by our own limited experience or instinctive bias.

That lesson was reinforced in my life just a few years ago when I was invited to participate in a grizzly bear study in Alaska, where we were to observe the response of grizzlies to the influences of smells, sounds, and colors that humans bring into the backcountry. Part of that experience was a safety training session that included instruction of what to do if approached or charged by a bear. If we were charged by a grizzly, the instruction we received was to turn and face the bear (do not run and invoke the predator/prey killing response), make yourself as big in posture as possible, and yell at the bear to go away. Well, I had been in Alaska before and had searched to see a bear with no such luck, so I wasn’t too concerned and took the training somewhat lightly.

Shortly after the training, the bear biologist who had trained us asked if I wanted to go with him to wade the river and count bears. Of

course I couldn’t wait. We donned our chest waders and were off for a two-kilometer walk in a river. I couldn’t believe all the bears and how close we were and how much they didn’t seem to care. In that walk we counted over forty grizzly bears.

On our way back we got behind a mother bear and her three little cubs. She was going painfully slow, and I suggested we pass her. The biologist said that was only a good idea if I was tired of breathing. So we followed patiently behind the bears until we reached a place where the river made a great horseshoe bend and we had our chance to cut through on a brushy trail to get ahead of her. In our haste we apparently intruded on another bear that we hadn’t seen, and as I waddled down the path behind my guide, I heard the huff and paw pounding of a bear coming up behind us. I spun and saw a large bear coming upon us fast. The biologist, true to his training, faced the attack, taking up a firm stand—right behind me! As I turned to face the bear, armed only with my small can of bear mace, it dawned on me why they had invited this great big, juicy botanist to join the party. I mean, what bear in their right mind would choose a tofu-diet-burger biologist when they could have the super-double-deluxe meal of a tender and juicy botanist—and, yes, fries with that!

While turning to run seemed the prudent thing to do, I trusted and followed the instruction I had received. Facing the bear, in my deepest, most menacing voice I yelled repeatedly, “Go away, bear! Go away!” The bear pulled up just short of me, paused for an eternal moment, twisted her head back and forth, and finally turned and slipped away into the underbrush. As I regained my faculties, I realized that I had begun to breathe again. After checking to be sure that I still had all of my body parts and functions, I trundled off back to camp, following my biologist friend who was explaining that this charge “wasn’t really so bad!”

I have often reflected back on these occasions and considered the faith I had in the wisdom and decisions of my Forest Service crew boss and the bear-biologist trainer and in the pre-event decisions I had made to follow them. I have pondered the analogous circumstances in which many of the recorded prophets found themselves faced with commands from God that were, if anything, counterintuitive. How and why did they respond? I think of the response of Adam to the angel when asked why he offered sacrifices: “I know not, save the Lord commanded me” (Moses 5:6). Burning the biggest, unflawed best of his flocks and harvest must have seemed such a waste.

Noah likewise was given a command that seemed very odd (see Genesis 6:14–15). He built a huge and immovable ship far from water’s edge. He likely endured endless ridicule over the highly improbable event of the whole earth being consumed by a flood and hence the improbable utility of such a vessel.

When Abraham, after years of faithful obedience, was finally blessed with a child, his mind and heart must have undoubtedly questioned the command to take his only son to the mount and offer him as sacrifice. Sadly, but willing to do the Lord’s will, based on his faith, Abraham built an altar and nearly executed his son before the Lord interceded and accepted his diligence as the offering (see Genesis 22:1–18). Perhaps because it is more similar to my own experience, I can relate to the uncertainty that must have crossed the minds of the children of Israel as Moses gave the command to follow him into the depths of the Red Sea to escape the armies of Egypt (see Exodus 14:21–22).

A question that is logically posed is “How do I know who to trust and follow?” This question brings us back to the styles of learning. We all learn by doing. The experiences we have while following a leader will build or destroy our confidence in them according to

their record of success. Even as a young commander Moroni led his people successfully in war against the Lamanites, but he also led during times of peace, devoting himself to preparing his people and fortifying their lands. These people recognized that following Moroni was a safe and prudent decision. Perhaps more critical than recognizing temporal leadership of men is the recognition of a divine influence and the power of the Lord’s Spirit to direct our lives.

As I was nearing the end of my master’s program I had the opportunity to attend an international professional meeting in Adelaide, Australia. A post-conference tour took us on a ten-day adventure from Adelaide on the south coast across the outback to Darwin on the north coast. Out in the middle we stopped near Alice Springs at a place called Ayers Rock. This is a large sandstone dome that seemingly rises up with nearly vertical walls over 1,100 feet out of an otherwise flat mulga desert. A tourist route that goes up the gentlest slope has metal posts cemented into the stone and connected to each other with chains. Even with this assistance, ascending the rock is only a feat for the fit and adventurous.

The night before our chance to assail the rock, a South African adventurer, a park ranger, and my roommate decided to do a free climb on the backside of Ayers Rock. This plan, hatched out over a few too many at the local bar, was shared with me upon my roommate’s return to our room. I’m still not sure how, but early the next morning I found myself following these characters in the ascent. The first 500 feet weren’t so bad, but, as I was the only climbing novice in the group, I was lagging behind, getting tired and a little nervous. It was apparent that we had passed the point of no return, as I found going up steep sandstone was much easier than going down. Three-quarters of the way up I found a little depression in the windswept stone to rest in, and I knew I was in trouble. My legs had

turned to jelly and quivered uncontrollably. I was scared nearly to the point of panic. My companions, all experienced climbers, were struggling to find solid grips, as the sandstone composition was flaky near the top. Seemingly strong grips would peel off when exposed to weight.

As I sat there on my perch and looked out over the vast, beautiful desert, I thought my family might want to know what I saw in my last moments on earth. I pulled out my camera, slipped off the case, snapped a couple of photos, and was brought back to reality as my camera case tumbled down the slope, previewing my unseemly path to the bottom. Paralyzed with fear, realizing one slip would have me ending with a splat, I wished we had told someone where we had gone—but no one knew. I'm not even sure that what we were doing was legal, and my hungover companions were not bolstering any confidence.

I felt all alone, overwhelmed by despair. And then a thought flickered in my mind, and I instantly remembered that somebody knew where I was: God knew! In an awkward beginning, realizing He knew how I had ended up in this predicament and also knowing I had probably not listened to His still-voiced counsel, I began to plead with the Lord. In an effort to show my sincerity, I entered into one of those deal-making kind of prayers: "Lord, I'll give up this and this and I'll do that and that if you will only get me out of this mess!" It was then that I realized my legs had stopped trembling, my breathing had slowed, and a peace had replaced the panic. My group had found a way up the slope, and though it was the most treacherous and steepest part and required greater strength and effort, I was able to scramble up to the top with renewed confidence.

That was one of those moments in my life in which I received an infusion of spiritual reality and gained a sense of who I could really trust in every place and in every circumstance.

From time to time we can have these powerful manifestations of the Lord's power and presence. They often come when we are sufficiently humbled by external forces, but they can come more often and more powerfully when we mature to true discipleship.

Through training and the development of faith, I take courage in the words of Nephi when he told his father Lehi:

I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them.
[1 Nephi 3:7]

Part of our mission on earth is to exercise agency and be tested to see if we can have the faith to "do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them" (Abraham 3:25). I am reminded of Saul's experience after defeating the Amalekites. The Lord had commanded him to "utterly destroy" the Amalekites and all their possessions without exception. Instead, Saul brought back the best of the flocks and other spoils to make a sacrifice unto God (see 1 Samuel 15:1–22). He was chastened by the Lord through the prophet Samuel: "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22). Rather than follow the commandment precisely, Saul did what he thought best and what was intuitive.

An adequate test of our faith must necessarily be something that seems counterintuitive; otherwise we could "trust in the arm of flesh" (D&C 1:19), lean unto our "own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5), and make the right decision without exercising our faith in God. Early in our marriage, my dear wife, Ann, introduced a motto for our family that she has continually taught our children and has had to occasionally remind me of: "When the prophet speaks, the debate is over." This sound advice

countermands all arguments, justifications, and rationales. Following this simple motto will always be to our benefit.

We must each be prepared ourselves and be about training our children and others for the trials that will surely come upon us. These trials will undoubtedly take many forms and may be faced alone or by the masses. In any event, our faith must be tested individually and independently. Few will face the unusual and high drama events of Moses, Paul, Nephi, or Joseph Smith in their trials. For most of the Saints, their trials will center in common elements of the gospel that when placed in unusual circumstances will seem impractical, illogical, or impossible.

For some, paying an honest tithe may seem inordinately illogical when putting a roof overhead and bread on the table requires more than they have. As a bishop I have sat in counsel with people who when pressed to financial extremes chose not to pay their tithes. I have promised them the Lord's blessings, as promised through the prophet Malachi:

Prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of Hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. [Malachi 3:10]

While I had no fear in pledging the Lord's promise to them, I knew that they could not receive these great blessings if they could not live by faith and prove the Lord by paying tithing first.

Other people struggle to accept a call to serve in local wards and stakes or perhaps a full-time mission. These time liabilities may seem to come at an inappropriate or inconvenient time in life or at a perceived opportunity cost. I have found that my most productive years at work have been positively correlated with the years I have dedicated the greatest amount of time to service in the kingdom, for He has promised that "he that seeketh me

early shall find me, and shall not be forsaken" (D&C 88:83). If you want to find success in your chosen pursuits here at BYU and in the future, spend time seeking "first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33).

One of my father's greatest challenges was to accept a newly called bishop in our ward who was a neighbor and, according to my dad, an irrigation water thief—something not to take lightly in a desert environment! Dad struggled in his faith to allow this good, however imperfect man to serve him as God's representative.

Likewise, newly revealed truth has often caused faithful members to stumble when it has conflicted with their own ideology. Revelations by Joseph Smith relative to the restoration of the practice of plural marriage were a significant blow to the faith of many early Saints, as was the Manifesto that rescinded the practice, causing further fractionation in the Church. As a missionary in Newfoundland, Canada, I saw the 1978 revelation allowing the priesthood to be given to all worthy male members of the Church test the faith of members who struggled to accept this new revelation.

Regardless of the trial or the setting, it is important to know in advance whom you trust and whom you will follow, even if it seems counterintuitive to you. I take courage in the humble expression of one of my heroes, the great prophet Nephi, when he exclaimed:

O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities.

I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me.

*And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins; nevertheless, **I know in whom I have trusted.** [2 Nephi 4:17–19; emphasis added]*

You see, that is the key: we are not perfect beings, but, whatever form it takes in our lives, the time will come when God, by His own voice or by that of His prophets, will command, "Into the burn!" and I bear witness to you that

it is critical at that point in time to know whom you trust and whom you will follow, because our response to this command will define our faith in God and our place in the eternities. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.