

# Education: Molding Character

ROBERT L. BACKMAN

I am grateful to be with you at the beginning of this education week. It is inspiring to be with so many people who are intent on learning, progressing, and improving. I believe you have discovered the fountain of youth. Roger G. Baker described what I mean when he wrote:

*There are some needs that we as humans can satisfy and call it done. We can feel safe with an enjoyable but humble shelter and know that we will have enough food for tomorrow. There are other needs that can never be satisfied. The fact is that the more we get the more we want. When people understand love, the need is never completely satisfied. The more they get the more they give and need to give.*

*Education is a similar human need. Some people find that learning just opens more doors of an insatiable appetite to know. Those who find pleasure in new ideas just keep discovering new ideas. . . .*

*I expect that urge to know is the Fountain of Youth for many people. Those who can get up each day and learn something new and exciting will always be young. [Roger G. Baker, *Deseret News*, 30 June 1991, p. P5]*

I am particularly pleased to address the theme of this education week, “Education: Molding Character.” This theme directs us to the true objective of education—the development of godlike characteristics and attributes. What we call *character* on a worldly level has parallels with what we call *faith* on a spiritual level. As I speak about character, I would like to point out some of these parallels.

## The Purpose of Life

The Lord revealed to Joseph Smith that “it is impossible . . . to be saved in ignorance” (D&C 131:6). The education we pursue should free us from the shackles of ignorance so that we can receive the salvation promised by the Lord. The Prophet observed that the great example of a saved being is the Lord Jesus Christ. In the Prophet’s words, Jesus “is the prototype or standard of salvation” (Joseph

---

*Robert L. Backman was a member of the Presidency of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 20 August 1991.*

Smith, *Lectures on Faith* 7:9). Since proper education ultimately leads to salvation, we can also say that the Savior is the prototype of an educated person, one whose character has been molded to conform to eternal principles. To be educated, therefore, is to be like Christ.

A proper education should provide a meaning for life. That meaning should be the fundamental purpose of our existence and should shape the building of our characters. It should be important enough to us to motivate our every action.

I am impressed with the number of wise men in various fields who have stressed the importance of discovering a meaning for life. For example, Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the Holocaust, stated, “Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for” (Viktor Frankl, *The Unheard Cry for Meaning* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978], p. 21). He noted that “The will to meaning is . . . a reliable criterion of mental health. . . . Conversely, lack of meaning and purpose is indicative of emotional maladjustment” (Frankl, *Unheard Cry*, p. 34). Peters and Waterman stated in their popular book, *In Search of Excellence*,

*We find it compelling that so many thinkers from so many fields agree on the dominating need of human beings to find meaning and transcend mundane things. . . . So strong is the need for meaning, in fact, that most people will yield a fair degree of latitude or freedom to institutions that give it to them.* [Thomas L. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., *In Search of Excellence* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), pp. 76–77]

It is interesting that most of these same authors, while emphasizing the need for meaning, have had no universal meaning to give. Frankl stated, “A logotherapist cannot tell a patient what the meaning is, but he at least can show that *there is a meaning in life*” (Frankl, *Unheard Cry*, p. 41). And another author awaits

a new faith to provide meaning:

*If a new faith is to capture our imagination, it must . . . be a system of beliefs that will marshal our psychic energy toward meaningful goals.* [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), pp. 238–39]

The restored gospel is that new faith. I am so grateful for revealed principles that provide eternal meaning for everyone. These principles are based on truth, which is “knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come” (D&C 93:24). The true meaning of life, however, must be accepted on faith, which is “the assurance which men have of the existence of things which they have not seen” (Smith, *Lectures on Faith* 1:9).

In recent years the Church media have focused on the purpose of life as one of three major themes. A Church videotape, *Our Heavenly Father’s Plan*, explains the plan of happiness. The videotape includes a montage of people pondering the question “What is the purpose of life?” I am always struck by the answers these people give:

“I’m not sure there is a purpose to life. I have no idea. You tell me.”

“I’m trying to figure it out.”

“I’ve been trying to figure that out all my life.”

“I’m just living it to live.”

These sentiments are not fabricated. Many people struggle with this question. Let me share a few of the thousands of responses we received from people who viewed this videotape.

From a young woman: “I believe in God, but I don’t understand the pain we experience in our daily lives. I need to understand.”

From a young man: “At this point and time in my life it seems like my world is falling apart. Sometimes I cry myself to sleep at night,

wondering, where does it stop? How can I ease the pain?"

From an inactive member: "After listening to the tape, I had a warm, wonderful feeling deep inside of me. I have been straying away from the Church, and hearing 'I Am a Child of God' again reminded me of why I am here on earth. The purpose of life is to learn to be happy."

This member has discovered that man is that he might have joy (see 2 Nephi 2:25), and that "happiness is the object and design of our existence" (*Teachings*, p. 255). Happiness is to be found, however, by pursuing the path that leads to it, which is the path of spiritual education—a path that cannot be walked without effort. When we recognize that God is the source of all knowledge, we will seek to live worthy of having the Holy Spirit with us to guide us to truth.

Joseph Smith taught:

*A person may profit by noticing the first intimation of the spirit of revelation; for instance, when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas, so that by noticing it, you may find it fulfilled the same day or soon; (i.e.) those things that were presented unto your minds by the Spirit of God, will come to pass; and thus by learning the Spirit of God and understanding it, you may grow into the principle of revelation, until you become perfect in Christ Jesus. [Teachings, p. 151; emphasis added]*

Elder John Widtsoe explained:

*It is a paradox that men will gladly devote time every day for many years to learn a science or an art; yet will expect to win a knowledge of the gospel, which comprehends all sciences and arts, through perfunctory glances at books or occasional listening to sermons. The gospel should be studied more intensively than any school or college subject. They who pass opinion on the gospel without having given it intimate and careful study are not lovers of truth, and*

*their opinions are worthless.* [John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1943), p. 8]

### **The Aim of True Education**

Developing character in harmony with the purpose of life is another great aim of education, and the path to happiness. We must understand the proper objective of education and approach learning with humility, sincerity, spirituality, and a keen desire for truth. President Joseph F. Smith named false educational ideas as one of three dangers that threaten the Church within (see *GD*, pp. 312–13).

He also stated that

*this knowledge of truth, combined with proper regard for it, and its faithful observance, constitutes true education. The mere stuffing of the mind with a knowledge of facts is not education. The mind must not only possess a knowledge of truth, but the soul must revere it, cherish it, love it as a priceless gem; and this human life must be guided and shaped by it in order to fulfil its destiny. The mind should not only be charged with intelligence, but the soul should be filled with admiration and desire for pure intelligence which comes of a knowledge of the truth. . . .*

*Educate yourself not only for time, but also for eternity.* [*GD*, p. 269]

President David O. McKay stated:

*True education—the education for which the Church stands—is the application of knowledge to the development of a noble and Godlike character. . . .*

*Character is the aim of true education; and science, history, and literature are but means used to accomplish the desired end. Character is not the result of chance work but of continuous right thinking and right acting.* [*GI*, pp. 440–41; emphasis added]

*Right thinking*, the ability to control our thoughts and direct them into productive channels, is fundamental to a godlike character. The mind is a wonderful thing. Joseph Smith said, “We consider that God has created man with a mind capable of instruction, and a faculty which may be enlarged in proportion to the heed and diligence given to the light communicated from heaven to the intellect” (*Teachings*, p. 51).

Note that the mind will be enlarged according to the heed and diligence we give to God’s revealed truth. An educated mind is one that can focus attention, and focusing attention is an act of will requiring effort. One writer observed that “attention is an act of will, of work against the inertia of our own minds.” He continues,

*As Rollo May says, “When we analyze will . . . , we shall find ourselves pushed back to the level of attention or intention as the seat of will. The effort which goes into the exercise of the will is really effort of attention; the strain in willing is the effort to keep the consciousness clear, i.e., the strain of keeping the attention focused. [M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), pp. 120–21; emphasis added]*

Those who have faith in the Lord deliberately expend effort to focus attention on unseen things. As Paul taught, we are to bring “into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Orson Hyde, one of the early apostles in this dispensation, taught,

*Let the mind be concentrated, and it possesses almighty power. It is the agent of the Almighty clothed with mortal tabernacles, and we must learn to discipline it, and bring it to bear on one point, and not allow the Devil to interfere and confuse it, nor divert it from the great object we have in view. [JD 7:153]*

This focus or concentration is captured in these three scriptures from the Doctrine and Covenants:

“Remain steadfast in your minds” (D&C 84:61).

“Treasure up in your minds continually the words of life” (D&C 84:85).

“Sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God” (D&C 88:68).

I have observed throughout my life that the great men of the world, especially the great Saints, are always thinking—about the Lord, about others, about how they can serve. Their minds are fertile fields for the seeds of inspiration, and their thoughts naturally spawn actions. This principle is illustrated in a simple story of love that I read recently: An elderly widow gathered some windfall apples, prepared and bottled applesauce, and then presented twelve quarts of applesauce to a young single mother who was depressed because of her struggles. The elderly widow said simply, “I’ve been thinking about you.” The effect on the young single sister was dramatic and miraculous. This act of kindness helped her conquer her depression (see Kathy England, “Quarts of Love,” *Ensign*, July 1991, p. 40).

As I observe missionaries, who are dedicating their lives to service, I am struck by how often they fall short of their potential because, as they say, “I didn’t think of it.” Education disciplines the mind to think, to ponder, to pray; and thus it becomes a receptacle for inspiration.

The real tragedy of negative emotions and thoughts, such as anger, envy, lust, or fear, is that they dissipate our energy, limiting our ability to experience the power of faith and the gift of charity.

Right thinking must be translated into *right acting*. Thomas Henry Huxley reminded us that “the great end of life is not knowledge but action” (*Technical Education*, 1877). Joseph Smith taught that faith is a principle of action as well as a principle of assurance. “It is faith,

and faith only, which is the moving cause of all action. . . . And as faith is the moving cause of all action in temporal concerns, so it is in spiritual” (Smith, *Lectures on Faith* 1:10, 12).

Gaining an assurance of the existence of unseen things is a profoundly satisfying experience. We often refer to this as testimony. But feelings will fade and even die unless they are converted to action. Carlyle said, “Conviction, were it never so excellent, is worthless till it convert itself into Conduct” (Thomas Carlyle, “The Everlasting Yea,” *The Victorian Age: Prose, Poetry, and Drama*, ed. John Wilson Bowyer and John Lee Brooks [New York: Prentice Hall, 1954], p. 168).

Similarly, the true test of education comes in how it affects our behavior. Elder William H. Bennett, speaking at an area conference, said:

*I have learned a great lesson from the letters of the alphabet. . . . We can repeat them frontwards or backwards, but when we do they have little meaning because they have not been put together with purpose and direction. When we put them together with real purpose and direction the result is sacred hymns, the scriptures, great poetry and prose, wonderful songs, and so on.*

*As it is in the letters of the alphabet, so it is in our lives. . . . Action is important. . . the right kind of action—purposeful action.* [William H. Bennett, Tonga Area Conference Report, 1976, p. 15]

In a classic address on service, President Hugh B. Brown taught:

*Every man’s religion should have practical issue, not merely emotional responsiveness which delights in hearing the gospel, but lacks diligence in living it. We must remember that religion is action, not diction. Let us pray that God will deliver us from our dullness of conscience, from a feeble sense of duty, from thoughtless disregard of others, and from all half-heartedness in our work. . . .*

*Let everyone get under the load of responsibility, and realize that every doctrine has its associated*

*duty, that every truth has its task. The gospel when the Master first proclaimed it, was not intended primarily for preaching—it was intended for action. . . .*

*No man can truly assimilate Christianity by impression alone, there must be expression as well.* [Hugh B. Brown, “Service,” *Relief Society Magazine*, December 1969, pp. 884, 888]

Action is a fundamental purpose for our existence and an integral part of our mortal probation. The Book of Mormon teaches this doctrine: “And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to *act* for themselves and not to be acted upon” (2 Nephi 2:26; emphasis added).

Brigham Young said: “As we grow up we receive strength, knowledge and wisdom, some more and some less; but only by keeping the commands of the Lord Jesus can we have the privilege of knowing the things pertaining to eternity and our relationship to the heavens” (DBY, p. 222).

Character, the consequence of proper education, is manifest through its influence. Men and women of character see through the mists of conformity and move the world to greater spiritual and moral heights. Character is virtue such as that which went out from Christ to heal all who touched him. It is a commanding presence, a power.

Faith is *character* that is matured and adapted to spiritual quests. Joseph Smith taught that “faith is not only the principle of action, but of power also, . . . whether in heaven or on earth” (Smith, *Lectures on Faith* 1:13). An assurance born of the Spirit that is translated into action results in marvelous power—a divine gift, a reward for righteousness. Such power achieves where lesser influences fail or do not even try.

*Indeed, the possession of power constitutes the test whereby we can measure and determine the*

*quality and the degree of faith we possess. Our faith consists of the degree of power and influence we have with God our Father whereby we work works of righteousness and do many miraculous things.* [Bruce R. McConkie, *Lord, Increase Our Faith*, Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year (Provo, 31 October 1967), p. 3]

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote of character:

*This is a natural power, [like] light and heat, and all nature cooperates with it. The reason why we feel one man's presence, and do not feel another's, is as simple as gravity. Truth is the summit of being; justice is the application of it to affairs. All individual natures stand in a scale, according to the purity of this element in them. The will of the pure runs down from them into other natures, as water runs down from a higher to a lower vessel.* [Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Character*, 1844]

Ironically, this powerful influence is often quiet and subdued. As the priesthood, it distills upon the soul as the dew from heaven (see D&C 121:45). Emerson also stated, “We shall one day see that the most private is the most public energy, that quality atones for quantity, and grandeur of character acts in the dark, and succors them who never saw it” (Emerson, *Character*, 1844).

How is such character developed? Education, secular and spiritual, is a necessity. But a higher process of education is suggested by the brochure for this education week. It included this description of the theme:

*The skilled hands of the sculptor move deftly over the clay, molding and shaping, bringing the masterpiece to life. So too, people take their experiences in life—what they learn and what they do with what they learn—molding and shaping, bringing to life their own characters.* [BYU Campus Education Week brochure, August 1991]

This description brings to mind images of artistry involving the skills of the teacher and of the learner: creativity, intuition, caring, a vision of the beautiful, experience, work, patience, endurance. All of these qualities and more go into the process of creating the educated person. If our education is to help us conform to the image of Christ, however, our Lord and Savior must be the “author and the finisher of [our] faith” (Moroni 6:4).

### **To Become Like Him**

We must voluntarily submit the process of molding and shaping of our characters to our Redeemer, who is, ultimately, the sculptor. As Isaiah suggested, we should learn to say, “But now, O Lord, thou *art* our father; we *are* the clay, and thou our potter; and we all *are* the work of thy hand” (Isaiah 64:8; emphasis added).

C. S. Lewis frequently taught the need to submit our growth to the will of God. He wrote,

*Christ says, “Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. . . . Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours.”* [Mere Christianity (New York: Macmillan, 1960), pp. 166–67]

What a giant leap of faith is required to say, honestly and sincerely, “Lord, I do not want to do what I want to do, I want to do what you want me to do. I want to become what you want me to become.” Implied in that statement is all of the effort required for right thinking and right acting, as well as the incomprehensible grace of

Christ, without whom we can do nothing. C. S. Lewis also wrote, “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done’” (*The Great Divorce* [New York: Macmillan, 1946], p. 72; italics in original).

If we yield ourselves to the Spirit, subduing the natural man, we can expect rewards.

The Lord said, “If thou shalt ask, thou shalt receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge, . . . that which bringeth joy, that which bringeth life eternal” (D&C 42:61). The great latter-day scholar Orson Pratt expressed his experience with learning:

*There is a joy, a satisfaction, existing in the mind of the righteous man, in the discovery of every additional truth. . . . It matters not how or in what way or manner he obtains this new truth, it is calculated to inspire his heart with joy and happiness.* [Orson Pratt, *Masterful Discourses and Writings of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), p. 523]

Joy in *learning*, however, must mature to joy in *doing*, or it will be short-lived. The seed, which is miraculous in itself, must sprout, grow, and bear fruit, or it will end in itself; it will not reproduce after its kind. Christ defined happiness in terms of doing: “If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them” (John 13:17).

The Book of Mormon states that the Nephites lived after the “manner of happiness” (2 Nephi 5:27). *Manner* is a characteristic or distinctive way of living or mode of acting. *Happiness*, or joy, is an attribute developed over time. People have the talent for happiness in varying degrees, but our challenge in this life is to learn to be happy.

As I mentioned earlier, Joseph Smith said that “happiness is the object and design of our existence.” *Object* in this context means end or goal, and *design* means a mental project or

scheme in which means to an end are laid down; deliberate, purposeful planning; an underlying scheme that governs functioning, developing, or unfolding (see *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* [Merriam-Webster: Springfield, Massachusetts, 1983], pp. 343, 814).

Happiness, then, is not only our end goal; it is the path we choose to get there. It is learning to enjoy *now* the kinds of things that we will enjoy in eternity. Emerson said, “Rectitude is a perpetual victory, celebrated not by cries of joy, but by serenity, which is joy fixed or habitual” (Emerson, *Character*, 1844).

It is this attribute of happiness that we carry with us in death. The Book of Mormon teaches that when we are raised in the Resurrection, “He that is happy shall be happy still” (Mormon 9:14), and “the righteous shall have a perfect knowledge of their enjoyment” (2 Nephi 9:14). We will be “raised to happiness according to [our desires for] happiness” (Alma 41:5). On the other hand, many will receive a lesser reward because they were “not willing to enjoy that which they might have received” (D&C 88:32).

God is the embodiment of the attribute of happiness. To be like him is to experience a fulness of joy. If we go contrary to that sacred nature, we go contrary to the nature of happiness (see Alma 41:10–11).

I remind you that the nature of eternal life is to learn to live the quality of life that God lives.

Joseph Smith said, “When men begin to live by faith they begin to draw near to God; and when faith is perfected they are like him” (Smith, *Lectures on Faith* 7:8). He also said, “Here, then, is eternal life—to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be gods yourselves” (HC 6:306).

And Elder Bruce R. McConkie gave this insightful commentary on John 17:3:

*It is one thing to know about God and another to know him. . . . To know God is to think what he*

*thinks, to feel what he feels, to have the power he possesses, to comprehend the truths he understands, and to do what he does. Those who know God become like him, and have his kind of life, which is eternal life.* [Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1972), 1:762]

I would emphasize one sentence from Elder McConkie: “We know [him], in the sense of gaining eternal life, when we *enjoy and experience* the same things [he does].” If our customary mode of acting is in harmony with the nature of God, we will be like him; we will enjoy and experience what he does.

What is God’s characteristic mode of acting? What do we know about the experience of godhood? The Lord answers, “For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). Our Father is fully devoted to sharing happiness with his children. Actually, the plan of salvation is referred to by Alma as the “plan of happiness” (see Alma 42:8), adding another dimension to our understanding of that great plan.

Elder John A. Widtsoe gave us additional insight into the quality of life God lives. He said,

*[Offering salvation] is the Lord’s self-imposed duty, this great labor his highest glory. . . . Under the Gospel, what is man’s highest ideal? Under the Gospel it must be to become like the Father. If the Lord’s concern is chiefly to bring happiness and joy,*

*salvation, to the whole human family, we cannot become like the Father unless we too engage in that work. . . . Likewise, it is man’s duty, self-imposed, his pleasure and joy, his labor, and ultimately his glory.* [John A. Widtsoe, *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, October 1934, 25:189–90]

Thus, to become like God we must learn to love and enjoy offering salvation to his other children. It must become our characteristic mode of acting.

As I stated in the beginning, the prototype of a truly educated person is the Lord Jesus Christ. A proper education consists of allowing our Lord and Savior to mold in us a godlike character, habitually attuned to right thinking and right acting. Then, through his grace, we can be like him and his Father, enjoying power and influence now, and eternal life, which is the kind of life God lives, hereafter. This is what the theme of this conference suggests to me: “Education: Molding Character.”

May God bless all of you during this eventful week to examine the meaning of education and to understand what God expects of us as his children that we might return to his presence and share in his glory. I am grateful for this marvelous institution, which provides this opportunity for so many of us to continue our education, and pray that the zeal and desire that we feel here might be carried with us into our everyday lives and reflect in our every activity, that we might truly be found to be disciples of Jesus Christ, which I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.