

Agency and Context

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A friend of mine who was critical of religion once asked me, “What does it really mean if a person behaves righteously because of external rewards and punishments? Every animal will choose reward over punishment.”

Elder Maxwell gave a marvelous talk about agency from this podium three weeks ago. I want to reiterate one of the points he made: A central feature of agency is that God doesn’t coerce us. Think about it. Could we trust a God who behaved the way He did because He was coerced into it? Satan’s proposal to coerce souls into godly character reveals his lack of understanding. How could any soul be trusted if he or she were behaving well because of coercion? Satan’s plan makes no sense except in terms of his seeking glory for himself. He craved the feeling of power that can come from making others obey. And he craved to be worshipped. He still does.

Rather than coercing us, God gives us the gift of a life experience here that allows opportunity to learn to think and feel as Christ does, to educate our desires, as Elder Maxwell suggested (see “Free to Choose?” 16 March 2004). And life provides innumerable opportunities for the learning.

Everyone Faces Core Issues

Earth life demands that we face a core set of issues, usually time and again as we proceed

across the years. We get lots of practice exercising agency relative to these issues, and it is through repeated encounters that we hone our character. People have faced these issues from day one, no matter when or where they lived. Here are a few examples:

Basic survival: we need food, water, shelter, and safety—not only for the survival of individuals but also for the survival of the species, with all the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that are involved with procreation.

We’re constantly dealing with uncertainty, although most of us probably don’t like to think about that. But, in reality, we don’t know what’s going to happen next year or next month or even in the next five minutes.

We’re always dealing with how we feel about ourselves and how we feel about other people. What do we think about them? How do we treat them?

We also have to deal continually with how others treat us.

We face issues of self-possession. To what extent do we control our thoughts, our emotions, and our behaviors?

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We're always facing challenges to our integrity. And we're continually making decisions about how to use our time.

These are just a few of the issues we encounter in our time here. Could there possibly be a richer environment in which to exercise agency?

We Exercise Our Agency in Context

I believe that one of the most important principles we derive from scripture is that we exercise our agency in context. What we believe is real and true has an enormous influence on our decision making as we face life's issues.

Myriad factors contribute to our personal contexts.

Clearly the *influence of the Holy Ghost* contributes to our context. That influence is one of our most precious gifts—a resource without parallel.

We also know that *Satan and his followers* seek relentlessly to entice us to think and feel and believe and act in ways that are incongruent with a godly character.

A factor that must be crucial but which we know little about is the *experience of our eternal spirits* and the choices we made prior to coming to the earth. Our subjective experience here is informed by our spirits, although we don't understand how our spirits interact with our earthly minds.

Our *genetic makeup and other biological factors* also can have a profound influence on how we perceive the world and ourselves. In terms of providing a learning experience, what superlative brilliance it is to put an eternal spirit into a biological body!

A dramatic example that reveals biological influence is brain injury. The kindest, wisest, most righteous people can be so affected by such an injury that their personalities change. In some cases they may act most inappropriately. Their biological context has changed.

Clinical depression provides another example of the power of biological influence. When I mention clinical depression, I'm not referring to the normal ups and downs of life or even the deep sorrow of losing a loved one. I'm talking about a persistent cognitive and emotional state that has a life of its own. It doesn't work to try to talk depressed people out of it or to tell them to just get their act together or count their blessings and cheer up. A typical view of reality for clinically depressed people is that life is hopeless and they are worthless. And that's the context in which they're exercising agency at that point.

Our *stage of development* is another context worth considering. Let us think about the context in which young children exercise their agency. We don't baptize children before age eight for good reason. They must be able to distinguish between right and wrong, and they must care about the distinction. They must be able to understand the choices available in a given situation, anticipate consequences, and weigh the alternatives. And they must be able to conform their behavior to their decisions. If we literally can't control some aspects of our behavior, how can we carry out a choice in that particular realm?

For example, a 15-month-old child may be tearing up your favorite book, even saying aloud, "No rip book," as she rips the book. But a child this age does not yet have the brain development to withhold that behavior. So the degree of development is part of the context in which this child exercises agency. It is about age two when children begin to be able to willfully control such behavior; thus a different context for agency emerges at that time.

Our *earthly environment* is crucial, including the influence of our immediate and extended families, our friends, the larger community, and the culture.

A notable example is Saul of Tarsus. He was acting according to what he believed to

be the truth when he persecuted the Christians and participated in the martyrdom of Stephen. On the road to Damascus he received more knowledge—in a dramatic and undeniable way—and he liked what he learned. Thereafter he proceeded to exercise his agency in light of the new information. He became one of the most dedicated and effective servants of the kingdom that ever was.

Laman, Lemuel, and Nephi grew up with a prophet for a father. They witnessed miraculous events time and again—including seeing angels. The two didn't like it, and the other did. Each exercised his agency in light of his perception of reality. Laman and Lemuel and their families ended up being separated from Nephi and the other believers, and they taught their descendants false beliefs about the gospel and about the Nephites. This affected the attitudes and choices of their descendants for generations.

Alma the Younger pled with the people of Ammonihah to repent. He said:

Nevertheless I say unto you, that it shall be more tolerable for them in the day of judgment than for you, if ye remain in your sins, yea, and even more tolerable for them in this life than for you, except ye repent.

For there are many promises which are extended to the Lamanites; for it is because of the traditions of their fathers that caused them to remain in their state of ignorance; therefore the Lord will be merciful unto them and prolong their existence in the land. [Alma 9:15–16]

Alma the Younger must have understood this doctrine exquisitely well, because he had sinned seriously, in light of having been taught the gospel. He himself had provided a context that influenced many of his people to disbelieve the truth. He worked to remediate that for the rest of his life, providing quite a different context for those who knew him then.

Another interesting example of people exercising agency in context is the sons of Helaman. In Alma 56:47–48 we read:

Now they never had fought, yet they did not fear death; and they did think more upon the liberty of their fathers than they did upon their lives; yea, they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them.

And they rehearsed unto me the words of their mothers, saying: We do not doubt our mothers knew it.

What a wonderful context those mothers provided their children in which to exercise agency.

What Do We Contribute to the Contexts of Those Around Us?

In thinking about the issues people face throughout this life, I believe we need to ask ourselves, “What do people face when they face us?” We need to consider carefully our contribution to the context in which others exercise their agency, even our contribution to the way they perceive reality. We can influence the way others see themselves and the world in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, particularly in the case of long-term relationships such as the family.

Do those around us have to work against us to develop a celestial character? There must needs be opposition, of course, but do we really want to be the ones providing it? God behaves toward His children in ways designed to maximize the likelihood of developing a godly character, and clearly He wants us to do the same.

The most efficient and effective way to be good for others is to have the principles of the gospel well in mind and well in heart, as it were, and to follow the promptings of the Spirit.

If our influence helps engender faith, hope, and charity in those around us, we are providing

a good context. If our influence helps engender a godly love for themselves and others, we are providing a good context. If our influence engenders in them a bridling of the passions, so that their emotional energy is at their command, we are providing a good context. If our influence helps those who are aware of their sins and inadequacies to still have hope and confidence in the Lord, we are providing a good context.

Lots of principles help us create a good context in which others exercise their agency. I've chosen just four of them to talk about in the remaining few minutes:

- Not treating others as objects
- Provoking others to love and good works
- Turning the other cheek
- Loving others, even our enemies, as we love ourselves

In practice, these principles work together.

The principle of *not treating others as objects* is brought out very early in the scriptural record. Cain is the prototype user. He actually killed his brother to get gain. Think about it a little and you can come up with lots of ways it's tempting to use others for our own gratification. The objectifier and the objectified are both damaged by this, and it spans a huge spectrum of unrighteousness.

As we talk about not treating others as objects, let's also consider the principle of *provocation*:

In Ephesians 6:4 we read: "And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord."

Likewise, in Colossians 3:21 we are instructed: "Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged."

Hebrews 10:24, on the other hand, reads, "And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works."

It can be tempting to see family members as objects sometimes and to provoke them

to wrath. It's heartbreaking to walk around a neighborhood and hear fathers and mothers yelling at their children. Most young children see their parents as gods, essentially, although they don't label it that way. Isn't this sobering? When parents are harsh to children—yelling, calling names, imposing inappropriate punishment, giving little encouragement—it makes it harder for those children to find the universe a friendly place and themselves and others lovable and trustworthy. Of course this doesn't mean those children will never form other views. But it makes it more difficult for them. Also, when parents don't routinely show kindness and self-possession, it makes it more difficult for their children to exercise their agency in that direction.

Yelling at children, calling them names, or engaging in other derisive behaviors is, indeed, treating them as objects. It will not provoke them unto love and good works but rather unto wrath and discouragement. Yelling at someone is virtually never appropriate. In fact, if we are really acting like Christ, we won't lose our temper. You're probably thinking to yourself, "Hey, Christ got angry." And you may recall D&C 121:43, which mentions the necessity of "reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost." But I have to think that godly anger is not the same as typical human anger. At a recent stake conference, Elder Roger Merrill made the point that Christ never lost His temper. He also made the point that "reproving betimes with sharpness" is best understood in terms of reproving with accuracy and precision. I believe that anger, as we humans generally seem to think of it, is not consonant with the presence of the Spirit. The experience of godly anger is quite a different thing.

The way parents treat their children can have a profound effect on how those children come to regard God. Children of harsh parents may have trouble even realizing that there is kindness in the world, let alone that there is a

kind and loving God who is patient, forgiving, and encouraging.

Research by John Gottman at the University of Washington indicates that when parents respond empathetically to their children, helping their children identify their own feelings and kindly setting limits as the children find solutions, those children become more able to soothe themselves (see John Gottman et al., *The Heart of Parenting: How to Raise an Emotionally Intelligent Child* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997]). This helps the children learn to bridle their passions, and it appears to help them become more resilient and better able to respond to stress and even to focus their attention better. Think of the effect this would have on the way those children exercise their agency. They would have choices available to them that they otherwise might not.

Another way to provide a healthy context for others is to *turn the other cheek*. In addition to not hitting back, this means that we may take another hit ourselves. Sometimes this is absolutely the right thing to do.

I used to give an assignment to students in my introductory psychology classes that involved turning the other cheek. (I know this may sound a little on the draconian side, and I did provide alternative assignments if students didn't want to do this one. But most of them chose this.) Here's how it went.

Students were to pick someone with whom they had an important and ongoing relationship—such as a spouse, a parent, a sibling, or a dear friend. It was to be someone who really cared about them and who was emotionally stable. They were to ask that person to pick one thing he or she would like the student to change within the relationship and to explain that thing in depth. That's a pretty scary thing to do for most of us, especially with someone we're close to. There were some ground rules, of course. The person had to agree to do this calmly, in a kind way, to stick to one issue, and to stop the discussion

at any point the student asked them to. The students were not to defend themselves during this discussion but only to ask questions or restate what the other person was saying until they understood the other person's point of view about this issue completely. Then, at another time, the students could give their point of view if they wanted to.

It's pretty tough to take a nondefensive stance when we're being criticized, but we can learn so much from this! I had lots of students say when they wrote about the experience, "What would have happened to my marriage if I'd never found out how my spouse felt about this?" Or, "I wish I had really understood my mother's point of view before." There were no disasters, I'm happy to report.

I'm not necessarily recommending that you go out and do this. But the point I want to make is about the effect this humble attitude, this willingness to receive feedback and listen to the other's point of view, has on that person. One of the most rewarding experiences in life is to have someone pay complete attention to us and to really care about what we're saying—to have the other person listen to us in depth rather than just going for the sound bite.

It's an especially sweet gift when the other person not only listens to us but wants to change for the better. When we see that this person cares about our well-being as much as they care about his or her own, we gain confidence and are less afraid of setting out to improve ourselves and making the inevitable mistakes. We may gain the courage or the insight to make choices we might not otherwise have made.

I believe Satan would have us resist examining ourselves closely, and he would have us avoid being examined closely and known deeply by others. Being carefully and patiently listened to is a context that fosters self-acceptance while it encourages self-examination.

One of the most helpful of all contexts for people to be in is to see themselves through the eyes of people who *love them unconditionally*. If

we know we're loved, we are less afraid to engage in the process of growth because we know we can make mistakes and still be loved. Also, we're much more likely to be able to love others if we have the blessing of being truly loved ourselves.

This applies even to people we don't like and to people who don't like us. If you really want to figure out how to provide a better context for others' use of agency, carefully read the Sermon on the Mount. And if you want to get humble fast, by the way, carefully read the Sermon on the Mount. What a wonderful exposition of the principles of faith, hope, and charity—and, I might add, self-awareness and self-possession.

Here's what Christ said about loving others:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;

That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?
[Matthew 5:43–46]

It's easy to love people who love us back.

I do realize that there is an appropriate feeling of revulsion when we're dealing with evil. But this does not preclude the love. Usually we're not going to be dealing with people who are really evil or who are really our enemies. But we all deal with difficult people who may be working against us at times. This can happen even within families.

I can think of a few good exercises in loving our adversaries. Let me mention one. The next time you're driving on the freeway and somebody cuts you off, think immediately to yourself: "Do I love this person?" If you don't, try

taking a deep breath, consciously relaxing, and deciding to love the offending driver. That person is a child of our heavenly parents, too.

An acquaintance of mine told me of an experience he had a number of years ago on the highway. A car pulled in front of him in a way that irritated him, and so he caught up with the car and gave the occupants a vulgar hand sign. Then, as he looked more closely into the car, he saw President Spencer W. Kimball looking back at him.

Does it really matter who was in the car? What kind of climate do we set when we hit back like that? The fact that we've been provoked doesn't mean we should provoke in return. There are other ways of dealing with the situation.

The Book of Mormon illustrates many ways of dealing with adversaries: teaching them the gospel, working with them, negotiating with them, serving them, waging warfare in response to being attacked, simply leaving, and even, on very rare occasions, submitting to their mistreatment. None of these precludes loving our adversaries. In fact, I submit that a prerequisite for dealing in any way with adversaries is to love them. A wonderful side effect of living this principle is that it invites the Spirit to teach us how to handle the situation. Hatred and contempt are not consonant with the presence of the Spirit.

Conclusion

In the course of our studies on peaceable and violent behavior in children, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill and I have concluded that there are endless and creative ways of being good to other people. The options for being bad are actually rather limited in comparison, although they may seem varied and attractive at first blush.

The scriptures abound with information about how to treat others so as to foster their development of godly character through the use of agency. Those I've mentioned only scratch the surface. This information is

bolstered by sound research that helps us understand some specific ways in which to apply the principles. In fact, I believe God is pouring out knowledge in many ways to help us help each other in these difficult times.

I hope that all of us will pay closer attention to how we treat others so that we help maximize their opportunities to become like Christ. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.