

# *Avoiding Spiritual Drift*

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In my lab on the ground floor of the Benson Building I have a marvelous piece of instrumentation called an inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometer, or ICP-MS for short. Used properly, it is capable of telling me about the elemental composition of a sample, from the major constituents to the minutest traces of contamination. It is so sensitive that I could take any one of you into the lab, have you stir some clean water with your finger, and then detect traces of uranium that the water has washed from your finger. There is a catch, though. If I use the instrument without careful preparation, all it gives me is a series of meaningless numbers. I can't assign the numbers to any particular element, and I have no way of relating the number to the concentration of an element in the sample. To use the ICP-MS properly, I first have to calibrate it with appropriate standards. Because I already know what is in the standards and at what concentration, I can compare the numbers from my sample to those from the standards, and I can use that comparison to accurately characterize my sample. I can say with certainty what elements are present and how concentrated they are.

It would be nice if I could just calibrate the instrument once and be done with it, but life isn't that simple. The instrument tends

to drift, so that yesterday's calibration is no longer good today. In fact, the most rigorous laboratory practices demand that I alternate standards and samples, in effect calibrating the instrument every few minutes. The process works best when the makeup of the standards is very similar to the makeup of my samples.

You can imagine that the quality of the standards I use is extremely important. If I use a standard that is of poor quality, or one that has in some way been contaminated, I will get bad results from my instrument. It isn't always easy to come up with good standards, yet they are essential for the smooth operation of our highly technological society. Good standards are so important that governments around the world have established laboratories whose primary mission is to create and distribute reliable standards. The laboratory in the United States is called the National Institute of Standards and Technology, or NIST. If I purchase a standard from NIST, I can use it with confidence to calibrate my instrument and to get good experimental results.

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*Paul B. Farnsworth was a professor in the BYU Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry when this devotional address was given on 13 July 2010.*

By now you are probably convinced that the absentminded professor picked up the wrong set of notes as he left his house this morning and that I'll be giving a devotional address to my analytical chemistry students tomorrow. There is, however, method to my madness. We make frequent reference to standards in the Church, and like the analytical chemist, we must choose our standards carefully. Instead of using them to measure concentrations, we use them to gauge our moral and spiritual progress. The choice of poor standards can lead, on one extreme, to smugness and spiritual complacency and, on the other, to feelings of worthlessness and depression. The use of defective standards can lead us to modes of behavior that may be perfectly acceptable to society in general but are inappropriate for members of the restored Church. Only by choosing the correct spiritual standards can we reach the divine potential that each of us possesses.

Let me begin by discussing some of the poor standards that we tend to adopt unless we make a conscious effort to avoid them. I think that one of the most insidious, yet most common, standards that we use is comparison with the lives of those around us. This corrupt standard expresses itself in a variety of ways. One is a kind of cutthroat competitiveness that surfaces often in our Latter-day Saint culture. We tend to confuse excellence with being better than the next guy.

A trivial example from my distant past may serve to illustrate the point. Based on this example, I will call this standard the "Lyle standard." When I was an undergraduate at BYU, I sat through two physical chemistry courses with a chemical engineering major named Lyle. We both did well in the courses and soon developed the habit of comparing scores after each exam. Before long, my measure of success was not how well I had mastered the material, but whether I had beaten Lyle out for the number one spot in the class.

Lost in the competition was the fact that our instructor was giving us only superficial coverage of quantum chemistry. Lyle and I finished as the top students in the class, but neither of us understood quantum mechanics. I doubt the gaps in our training had much effect on Lyle. I don't think the Schrodinger equation figured much in his work as a practicing chemical engineer. For me it was a different matter. A graduate course in molecular spectroscopy painfully exposed gaps in my understanding that the Lyle standard had failed to reveal.

The problem with the Lyle standard isn't confined to academic pursuits. It surfaces in Sunday School lessons, particularly those that deal with topics with which we are a little uncomfortable. It is much easier to talk about the evils of the world around us than it is to humbly consider what we might be doing better to live more Christlike lives. A destructive byproduct of the use of others as standards is that it is easier to find a comparison that makes us feel good than it is to improve our own behavior. How many of us have felt a sense of pride and accomplishment as we have read the recent headlines stating that Utah is number one in the nation in volunteer service? Leading the nation in volunteerism isn't important. Giving generously of our time and resources is. Using national statistics as a measure of our commitment to service is like having worthiness interviews with questions such as "Is your attendance at sacrament meeting at least 10 percent above the stake average?"

President Ezra Taft Benson pointed out the pitfalls of the Lyle standard in his classic conference address on pride when he said:

*The proud make every man their adversary by pitting their intellects, opinions, works, wealth, talents, or any other worldly measuring device against others. In the words of C. S. Lewis: "Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. . . . It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of*

*being above the rest. Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone.*" (*Mere Christianity*, New York: Macmillan, 1952, pp. 109–10.) [Ezra Taft Benson, "Beware of Pride," *Ensign*, May 1989, 4]

In some, the comparison with neighbors and friends yields not a sense of moral superiority but an equally damaging sense of inadequacy. Again, a trivial example from my own experience illustrates the point. I enjoy cycling. Early this summer I was riding up the South Fork of Provo Canyon. It was a beautiful evening, the temperature was perfect, and a tailwind was gently helping me up the canyon at a pace that would be a personal best for me. I felt great. Then I heard the gentle clicking of another bicycle chain to my left. A young man rode past me, giving me the obligatory "How's it going?" which I interpreted as "Eat my dust." All too quickly he passed from sight up the road ahead of me. My euphoria vanished and my spirits sank. I thought, "I will never ride that fast."

What a shame that I let comparison to a completely inappropriate standard destroy the pleasure of the moment. My circumstances and native abilities, not to mention my age, were obviously completely different from those of the other cyclist. It's sometimes less obvious that each of us has different spiritual gifts and backgrounds. That unawareness of differences in circumstances or abilities leads to danger in the use of others as gauges of our spiritual progress. The same destructive feelings that ruined my bike ride are manifest in a much more serious way in the young mother who sinks into depression because her mothering skills don't seem to measure up to those of her supermom neighbor, or in the returned missionary whose mission experiences don't seem to compare to those of his friend who baptized dozens and was assistant to the president.

When I am feeling spiritually inadequate, I find comfort in the words of Moroni:

*And again, I exhort you, my brethren, that ye deny not the gifts of God, for they are many; and they come from the same God. And there are different ways that these gifts are administered; but it is the same God who worketh all in all; and they are given by the manifestations of the Spirit of God unto men, to profit them.* [Moroni 10:8]

Moroni then lists spiritual gifts in a way that makes clear that they are not all given to everyone and reemphasizes the point in a beautifully symmetric verse:

*And all these gifts come by the Spirit of Christ; and they come unto every man severally, according as he will.* [Moroni 10:17]

These verses remind me that the spiritual gifts that I have are unique to me, as are the challenges and opportunities on which I can bring them to bear. My accomplishments compared to those of others are not important. What is important is how I use the gifts God has given me to build His kingdom.

I need to draw an important distinction at this point between using others as measuring sticks for our own progress and turning to the examples that others set for inspiration. We can find motivation and inspiration in the accomplishments and gifts of others without making the kind of comparisons that lead to pride or depression. Good examples are not particularly rare, and they aren't confined to our LDS community. I have learned a lot about being a scientist and a Christian from a non-LDS friend whom I admire not only for his keen intellect and hard work but also for the generosity with which he shares his ideas and talents with students and colleagues. I learned about selflessness from the students in my BYU ward who never failed to show up for a moving party. I learn daily about love and compassion by watching my wife care for her elderly mother. You may learn about spirituality by watching a Church leader, about

friendship from a roommate, about sacrifice from a parent, or about service by reading about the efforts of a total stranger to better lives in the third world.

The pitfalls of the Lyle standard don't lie in recognizing strengths or deficiencies in those around us, but in using those observations as measures of our own value.

In the quote I read from President Benson, he alludes to a second pervasive and defective standard that I will call the "Madison Avenue standard." Each year commercial interests spend billions of dollars to persuade us to buy goods and services, most of which we really don't need. The advertizing contains a less-than-subtle subtext that tells you that your value as a person lies in what you own, spend, and consume.

Although there is no correlation between wealth and virtue, we are prone to judge ourselves and each other by the size of our incomes, the brand of our cars, the clothes we wear, or the size of our houses. I saw ample evidence of the destructive effects of the Madison Avenue standard during my service as bishop of a BYU married student ward. I spent many hours counseling with young couples that were burdened with excessive debt. In most cases the debt had been incurred for the purchase of nonessentials, like his and hers new cars, health club and cable TV contracts, high-end entertainment systems, and even the oversized chunk of carbon that had seemed so impressive on the bride-to-be's finger during the engagement. The couples' financial problems were often traceable back to their single days. The marriages had not been a joining of assets, but rather a merging of liabilities. The debt often had heart-wrenching consequences. Young mothers who wanted desperately to give full time to their children were forced to work at menial jobs to make ends meet. Educational goals were abandoned because husband or wife, or both, had to work full time to pay off the debts.

Our society's emphasis on material success is a constant force that, if not resisted, can distort priorities and cause permanent damage to ourselves and our families. Even in the friendly confines of BYU, I am faced with such questions as "Should I go in to work on Saturday to finish a paper or spend the time working on a project with my wife?" or "How can I take a family vacation and still be prepared for the classes that start in two weeks?" You will be asking yourselves similar difficult questions throughout your lives. If our standard of success is a strictly material one, chances are that we will come up with the wrong answers. I need frequent reminders of the Saviors words found in the Sermon on the Mount:

*Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:*

*But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:*

*For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. [Matthew 6:19–21]*

These simple verses help me remember that my real treasures are friendships, family, and opportunities to serve.

The last defective standard I'll discuss is what I will call the "Hollywood standard." This one is hard to pin down because it emerges from a culture that is largely without moral roots. It tends to be a standard of violence and profanity and promiscuity. While occasionally such a standard serves to warn us against its own evils, more often it attempts to attract us. When was the last time we saw a hero in an action movie turn the other cheek or complete a thought without using profanity, or a movie couple avoid extramarital sex because they considered intimacy and marriage sacred? If we immerse ourselves in such a culture, we can, without realizing it, set ourselves morally adrift.

I think that most of us, with a little introspection, could find the influence of the Hollywood standard in our behavior. We may see it in our response to a driver who cuts us off in traffic, in the language we use when we are hurt or surprised, or in the excuses we make for ourselves when watching questionable material in a movie or TV show. The Hollywood standard is guiding our behavior when we let the ever-shifting values of the motion picture, TV, or video game ratings decide for us what is appropriate to watch or consume, without any consideration of our own whether the material is appropriate.

As pervasive as these worldly standards are, we need never be far removed from the correct ones. Nephi, in discussing the baptism of Jesus, made it clear who our standard should be. He said:

*And again, it showeth unto the children of men the straitness of the path, and the narrowness of the gate, by which they should enter, he having set the example before them.*

*And he said unto the children of men: Follow thou me. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, can we follow Jesus save we shall be willing to keep the commandments of the Father?*

*And the Father said: Repent ye, repent ye, and be baptized in the name of my Beloved Son.*

*And also, the voice of the Son came unto me, saying: He that is baptized in my name, to him will the Father give the Holy Ghost, like unto me; wherefore, follow me, and do the things which ye have seen me do. [2 Nephi 31:9–12]*

Few, if any, of us have had Nephi's privilege of seeing the Savior's life in a vision, but accounts of what He did and said are no further away than our scriptures. The scriptures, combined with the teachings of the modern prophets, are our most important standards.

Nephi's father, Lehi, was clearly aware of the need for written standards in protecting his family and his descendents from spiritual

drift. I imagine that it was difficult for him to send his sons into danger to retrieve the brass plates, but he understood, as did Nephi, that the records would serve as critical guides for generations to come. Lehi's prophetic dream of the tree of life places added emphasis on the importance of God's word as a standard. We sing in a hymn about holding to the iron rod, but the verb used in the scripture is "clinging." The image of clinging to the iron rod implies constant reference to scripture and prophetic guidance. We are a lot like my analytical instrument in that we require frequent and regular reference to good quality standards to keep ourselves spiritually calibrated. It doesn't take years or generations for the effects of spiritual drift to appear. Our weekly sacrament meeting attendance, daily scripture reading, and personal prayer all serve as protection against short-term spiritual drift.

I'd like to push my analytical chemistry analogy a little further. I noted that the best standards for my instrument are those that are closely matched to the samples that are going to be analyzed. We too need standards that match the context of the challenges that we face. The experiences of the Israelites, of Alma, or even of the 19th-century Saints may seem remote to us, and the language of the scriptures is increasingly challenging to modern readers.

We can turn to two standards that are matched to our circumstances. The first is in the counsel that we receive every six months in our general conferences. I had an experience during the last October conference of a type that I'm sure many of you will relate to. There was a conference talk just for me. My wife, Elizabeth, had purchased a used horse trailer, and I inherited the task of adapting the wiring on the trailer and a new brake controller to the hitch on our truck. A series of mishaps turned what should have been a straightforward task into a long ordeal that included hours with me crammed awkwardly under the dashboard of our pickup. I had planned to finish the job in



the two hours between the Saturday conference sessions, but it dragged on, and I worked steadily into the evening, listening to conference on the truck radio. Finally, it was time to go to the priesthood session. I cleaned myself up and left for our stake center in a black mood. I was mad at the previous owner of the trailer who had wired it incorrectly. I was mad at the manufacturer of the brake controller for specifying the wrong wire size. I was mad at Toyota for putting the wires in places that only a contortionist could reach. And, worst of all, I was mad at my wife for expecting me to be able to make the whole thing work. That evening President Monson gave a talk in the priesthood session that was directed right at me, a personal call to repentance. It was entitled “School Thy Feelings, O My Brother.” He spoke of the destructive influence of anger. Chastened and repentant I returned home. I had come dangerously close to damaging my relationship with my wife over some uncooperative but inanimate strands of copper wire. President Monson’s talk provided me with a timely and important recalibration of my response to frustration. With a better attitude I was able to step back and rethink my approach to the job, and I was able to finish it easily during the next week.

We all have access to a second standard that helps us recognize Christlike behavior in the immediate context of our lives today as opposed to the remote context of the scriptural world. Nephi, in the same discourse from which I just quoted, anticipated our need for help in applying the scriptures. He said:

*Wherefore, now after I have spoken these words, if ye cannot understand them it will be because ye ask not, neither do ye knock; wherefore, ye are not brought into the light, but must perish in the dark.*

*For behold, again I say unto you that if ye will enter in by the way, and receive the Holy Ghost, it will show unto you all things what ye should do.*  
[2 Nephi 32:4–5]

In the course of a lifetime, each of us will face challenges and difficult questions for which there is no obvious scriptural precedent. They will be questions relating to our professions, our families, or our church service. We can take comfort in the knowledge that we are entitled to personal revelation through the gift of the Holy Ghost. As I reflect on the difficult decisions that I have faced, I am grateful for the assurance and guidance that I have received from this essential personal standard.

I think that for most of us the greatest challenge lies not in recognizing what or who our standard is, but in avoiding the influence of the worldly standards that intrude themselves upon us. We can’t remove ourselves from the world, and, like my analytical instrument, we tend to drift. It is by frequent reference to the correct standard that Christ has provided us that we avoid such drift. In regular scripture reading we have constant reminders of Christ’s teachings and example. In church attendance we have weekly recommitment to the Savior and association with others who share that commitment. In the conference addresses from the brethren we have timely warnings of the challenges that we will face and council on how to surmount them. Through daily prayer we remain susceptible to the guidance of the Holy Ghost.

The admonitions that we receive from our leaders to attend church, pray, read the scriptures, and remain worthy of the influence of the Holy Ghost can be viewed as reminders to regularly correct our courses by reference to divine standards. It is my prayer that we will do so, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.