

# Personal Epiphanies

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**M**y young brothers and sisters, as I contemplate your great future, your wonderful potential, as well as your acute challenges, I am humbled with the responsibility of speaking to you. Being somewhat closer to the eternities than you are, I have chosen to introduce you to concepts that may be new to some of you. I do so in the spirit of the song from *Mary Poppins*, “A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.”

I wish to emphasize a profoundly significant phenomenon that occurs in life. It is inspiration. I also want to introduce you to the word *epiphany*.

In the Christian tradition, epiphany is the twelfth night of Christmas, usually January sixth. It celebrates the revelation of Jesus the Christ to the Gentiles, the magi at Bethlehem. We do not celebrate the day of epiphany, and it is not part of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. However, *epiphany* has another meaning: the appearance of or manifestation from God or a supernatural being. It is also described as a phenomenon that occurs with and seems to result in another.

Writer James Joyce used the word *epiphany* to designate an event in which the essential nature of something—a person, a situation,

an object—was suddenly perceived. It is thus an intuitive grasp of reality achieved in a quick flash of recognition in which something, usually simple and commonplace, is seen in a new light. In our understanding, this can be inspiration.

To be able to perceive by inspiration the common and ordinary things of life in their true meaning is a great blessing. We heard of an example of this from a woman who had just adopted a new baby. In her joy she said, “I now have two hearts.” Mothers seem to have as many hearts as they have children.

Tonight, however, I wish to speak of a few uncommon, remarkable, spiritual events that have occurred throughout history.

The First Presidency recognized that many historical figures and events were inspired by God. They wrote:

*The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well*

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as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals.

*The Hebrew prophets prepared the way for the coming of Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah, who should provide salvation for all mankind who believe in the gospel.* [In Spencer J. Palmer, *The Expanding Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1978), frontispiece]

Spiritual intuition has its roots in the Garden of Eden. Mother Eve was caught in a dilemma. She could either avoid partaking of the forbidden fruit and stay in the Garden of Eden, or she could partake of the fruit and have a mortal existence, becoming the mother of the human race. After Adam and Eve had achieved mortality, Eve stated:

*Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient.* [Moses 5:11]

Interestingly, these personal epiphanies often come to young people. In secular history we read of Joan of Arc, a simple peasant girl who could neither read nor write. She claimed visions from heaven directing her to liberate her oppressed country, France, from the English. At seventeen, she left her home to fulfill those visions. At first people laughed and declared her insane, but in the end they gave her a horse and the escort of a few men to go and see the king.

Young King Charles VII of France lived in a castle in Chinon. The long Hundred Years' War with the English had impoverished and divided his country. Charles had heard about Joan and decided to test her. He slipped into the ranks of the army and let one of his trusted associates occupy the throne. When Joan came

into the room, she barely acknowledged the man on the throne but walked up to Charles and curtsied to him as the king. That convinced the king, and he gave her command over his twelve thousand troops. At first the French soldiers did not want to obey her, but when they saw that all succeeded who followed her, and no one succeeded who disregarded her, they got into line and looked upon her as their leader.

Clad in a suit of white armor and flying her own standard, Joan of Arc liberated the besieged city of Orleans in 1429 and defeated the English in four other battles. Twice she was wounded, but each time she recovered and went on fighting. Her orders were those of a military genius. She marched into the city of Reims and stood with sword and banner in hand while Charles was crowned king. She fought in the Battle of Paris until the Burgundians, who were allies of the English, captured her at Compiègne and sold her to the English for sixteen thousand francs. She was imprisoned and suffered many insults. She was tried as a witch and a heretic and burned at the stake in 1431, all because she claimed inspiration.

Another example, drawn from sacred history, is the prophet Samuel. As a boy, he had retired to sleep in the temple, where the ark of God was. He heard the voice of the Lord calling, and he ran to Eli and said, "Here am I; for thou calledst me." Eli assured him that he had not called him and told him to go back to sleep. The Lord called again to Samuel. Samuel arose and again went to Eli and said, "Here am I; for thou didst call me." Eli again told him, "I called not, my son; lie down again."

The point I wish to make about this story is in the next verse: "Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, neither was the word of the Lord yet revealed unto him" (1 Samuel 3:4–7).

Many of you dear young brothers and sisters do not yet know the Lord, nor is the word of the Lord revealed to you. The Lord called

Samuel a third time, and Samuel went to Eli, not recognizing the voice of the Lord. Eli perceived that the Lord had called the child. He instructed Samuel to lie down again, and if the Lord spoke to him another time, he should say, "Speak, Lord; for thy servant heareth." So Samuel went and lay down in his place. "And the Lord came, and stood, and called as at other times, Samuel, Samuel. Then Samuel answered, Speak; for thy servant heareth" (1 Samuel 3:8–10).

My dear young friends, there is a profound lesson in this: we are to come to know the Lord so that when he speaks to us we can answer, "Speak, for thy servant heareth." This is one of the greatest blessings in mortality.

My first radio was a crystal set. It was hard to tune to the frequency of a particular radio station. One had to literally scratch the receiving wire whisker over the top of the rough crystal to find the right pin point, a little valley or peak on the crystal, where the signal was received. Just a millimeter off on one side or the other of that point and you would lose the signal and get scratchy static. Over time, with patience and perseverance, good eyesight, and a steady hand, you could learn to find the signal point on the crystal without too much difficulty.

So it is in learning to attune ourselves to the inspiration from God and tune out the scratchy static. We have to work at being tuned in. Most of us need a long time to become tuned in most of the time. When I was a young General Authority, President Marion G. Romney, who was in his seventies at the time, told us, "I know when I am working under the Spirit and when I am not." To be able to recognize when one is being guided by the Spirit is a supernal gift.

President Wilford Woodruff had a remarkable experience of being moved upon by the Spirit. He recounted:

*When I got back to Winter Quarters from the pioneer journey [1847], President Young said to me, "Brother Woodruff, I want you to take your wife and children and go to Boston and stay there until you can gather every Saint of God in New England and Canada and send them up to Zion."*

*I did as he told me. It took me two years to gather up everybody, and I brought up the rear with a company (there were about one hundred of them). We arrived at Pittsburgh one day at sundown. We did not want to stay there, so I went to the first steamboat that was going to leave. I saw the captain and engaged passage for us on that steamer. I had only just done so when the spirit said to me, and that, too, very strongly, "Don't go aboard that steamer, nor your company." Of course, I went and spoke to the captain, and told him I had made up my mind to wait.*

*Well, that ship started, and had only got five miles down the river when it took fire, and three hundred persons were burned to death or drowned. If I had not obeyed that spirit, and had gone on that steamer with the rest of the company, you can see what the result would have been. [Discourses of Wilford Woodruff, sel. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946), pp. 294–95]*

Many of us remember President Hugh B. Brown telling of a personal epiphany that he had in World War I. At that time he owned a farm in Canada. One morning he went out to prune a currant bush that had grown all to wood and no longer blossomed or produced currants. So he got his pruning shears and cut it and pruned it and clipped it back until there was nothing left but the stumps.

President Brown said he imagined that if the currant bush could speak, it would say, "How could you do this to me? I was making such wonderful growth. I was almost as big as the shade tree and the fruit tree that are inside the fence, and now you have cut me down."

President Brown answered, "Look, little currant bush, I am the gardener here, and I know what I want you to be. I didn't intend

you to be a fruit tree or a shade tree. I want you to be a currant bush, and some day, little currant bush, when you are laden with fruit, you are going to say, “Thank you, Mr. Gardener, for loving me enough to cut me down, for caring enough about me to hurt me. Thank you, Mr. Gardener.”

President Brown then explained that when World War I came, he was in England in command of a cavalry unit in the Canadian army. He was a field officer and was being considered for promotion to general in the British army. He was ordered to appear one morning in the office of the commanding general of the Canadian forces. His uniform was pressed and his buttons polished and his boots shining. President Brown recalled: “I walked smartly into the office of the general and I saluted him smartly, and he gave me the same kind of salute a senior officer usually gives—a sort of “Get out of the way, worm!” He then advised President Brown that he was not going to be appointed a general even though he had passed examinations and had the seniority and was a good officer.

He was being sent back to Canada to become a training officer and a transport officer. As the general slipped out of the room to answer a telephone, President Brown noticed on the general’s desk his personal history sheet. Across the bottom, in bold block-type letters, was written “THIS MAN IS A MORMON.”

The general came back, dismissed President Brown, and President Brown went away with a broken heart, bitterness in his soul, and a feeling of failure and disappointment. When he got back to his tent, he clenched his fists, shook them at heaven, and said:

*“How could you do this to me, God? I have done everything I could to measure up. There is nothing that I could have done—that I should have done—*

*that I haven’t done. How could you do this to me?” I was as bitter as gall.*

*And then I heard a voice, and I recognized the tone of this voice. It was my own voice, and the voice said, “I am the gardener here. I know what I want you to do.” The bitterness went out of my soul, and I fell on my knees by the cot to ask forgiveness for my ungratefulness and my bitterness.*

President Brown would have been the senior military officer in all western Canada, with security and a good income, and he would have had to raise his daughters and two sons in army barracks. He commented that they probably would have married out of the Church and not amounted to anything.

President Brown concluded this remarkable story by saying that when we are overcome with disappointment and heartbreak and defeat, we should remember that

*“God is the gardener here. He knows what he wants you to be.” Submit yourselves to his will. Be worthy of his blessings, and you will get his blessings. [See Hugh B. Brown, “The Currant Bush,” *New Era*, January 1973, pp. 14–15]*

I’m sure most of us feel like the currant bush at some time or another, but as we look back on some of the bumps of life, we can see how they have shaped us and helped us to develop.

I have been privileged to live in a time of the greatest accumulation of knowledge in the world’s history. I remember as a boy on the farm when we lit the coal-oil lamps after dark to light the house. Wood was the only source of heat for all of our cooking and warmth. When I was about eight years old I learned to drive a team of horses. That is much more difficult than driving a car. Sometimes one horse will not pull.

You all missed a lot not living in the time of the Model T Fords. If the Model T got hot enough, it would just keep going with

spontaneous combustion when you turned off the ignition key. If the hill was too steep for the car to go up frontward, you turned around and backed up because it seemed to have more power in reverse. The first ones had to be hand-cranked in the summer and the winter because they had no starters. The medical doctors fixed a lot of broken arms because the Model T would backfire when men and women tried to start it with the hand crank. Looking back, it doesn't seem like there was much mechanical inspiration in a Model T Ford. But then, they only cost \$290 when mass produced.

You are the beneficiaries of all of the advances in science, medicine, travel, space, technology, communication, agriculture, entertainment, and all the other fields of knowledge God has revealed to mankind. All of this knowledge ought to be used for the blessing of mankind. It permits the work of the Lord to advance. For instance, jet airplanes permit General Authorities, area authorities, and auxiliary leaders to visit stakes all over the world for teaching and training.

I learned at a young age that inspiration can come to any of us. When I was in junior high school, I was taking a difficult class. Most of what was being taught went over my head. Perhaps I was not trying hard enough. The teacher asked me something. I didn't understand the question, let alone the answer. Right out of nowhere a response came into my mind that I repeated to the teacher. To my surprise, it was the right answer, but I knew it had not come from me.

So how can we recognize inspiration when it comes? Enos stated, "While I was thus struggling in the spirit, behold, the voice of the Lord came into my mind" (Enos 1:10).

The voice is not necessarily audible. The spirit of revelation comes by divine confirmation. "I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come

upon you and which shall dwell in your heart" (D&C 8:2).

How did the voice of the Lord sound to Elijah the Tishbite? It was not the "strong wind [which] rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks," nor was it "an earthquake," nor "a fire." Elijah described it as a "still small voice" (1 Kings 19:11-12).

It is that inner voice, the Spirit, that has the power to whisper through and pierce all things.

In the words of Helaman,

*It was not a voice of thunder, neither was it a voice of a great tumultuous noise, but behold, it was a still voice of perfect mildness, as if it had been a whisper, and it did pierce even to the very soul.* [Helaman 5:30]

We believe that all righteous people have the potential to receive inspiration from God. The many great masterpieces of music, art, poetry, and other creations of beauty testify to this. Handel's glorious oratorio *Messiah* is proof of this.

Michelangelo's statues of the pietà, Moses, and David also testify of this. Surely the poet William Wordsworth was inspired when he wrote "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood."

The same is true of the inventors who have been inspired to bring us all of the marvelous inventions of our time.

We believe the Spirit of God can come to all men and women. This is in distinction to the gift of the Holy Ghost. Administrations of the Holy Ghost are limited without receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that "there is a difference between the Holy Ghost and the gift of the Holy Ghost" (*Teachings*, p. 199).

Many outside the Church have received revelation from the Holy Ghost, convincing them of the truth of the gospel. It is through this power that sincere investigators after the



truth acquire a testimony of the Book of Mormon and the principles of the gospel before baptism.

However, those possessing the gift of the Holy Ghost can come to greater light and testimony. The Holy Ghost bears witness of the truth and impresses upon the soul the reality of God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, so deeply that no earthly power can separate one from that knowledge. Indeed, not having the gift of the Holy Ghost is somewhat like having a body without a spiritual immune system.

The First Vision of Joseph Smith is the most remarkable epiphany in the history of the world. We are all familiar with the Prophet Joseph's story. He retired to the Sacred Grove to inquire of the Lord as to which religion was correct. He was seized by a power that completely overcame him and bound his tongue so that he could not speak. He wrote, "Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction."

Then, calling forth all of the spiritual power he had, he asked God to deliver him from this power of darkness.

*Just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me.*

*It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound.*

Now here is the significant account:

*When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of*

*them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him! [JS—H 1:15–17]*

In the history of mankind, few indeed have been privileged to see God or hear Him directly. Yet the gifts of the Spirit since the restoration of the gospel have been rich in the Church and exist today among the faithful members of the Church.

My dear young friends, as Samuel was told, for those of you who do not yet know the Lord, to whom the word of the Lord has yet to be revealed, please open your spiritual ears and eyes. Tune your hearts and souls, as I had to do on my old crystal radio. Set your receiver to the exact spot in your soul where the spiritual signals are coming through. In so doing you will be able to perceive the simple, ordinary things of life in a marvelous new light. You will have remarkable spiritual insight.

To do this you will have to pray fervently, with a clean mind and a humble heart. You will need to earnestly try to keep all of the commandments. You will need to be in harmony with the leadership of the Church, from your bishop and stake president to the First Presidency.

If you can learn to hear the whispering of the Spirit and be guided by your spiritual leaders, you will avoid many of the pitfalls and heartaches of the world. You will have a comforting feeling of your great worth as a choice son or daughter of God. To this end I bless you.

Mine is the sure witness that God lives, and that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior and Redeemer of the world. Of this I testify with all my soul, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.