

Be Excellent: Becoming Who You Are in Today's World

DAVID W. HART

There is an ancient temple in Greece, in some foothills near the ocean, that is dedicated to the Greek god Apollo. Above the entrance of this temple, now referred to as the Oracle at Delphi, is the following well-known inscription: "Know thyself." This simple yet profound invitation reflects an important step in our progression as human beings.

Like many societies, the Greeks were concerned with existential questions, such as what it means to be human. Some of the best thinking on this subject is captured in what I argue is one of the more significant non-scriptural books in Western literature. The philosopher Aristotle addressed these kinds of issues in an unfortunately titled book, *The Nicomachean Ethics*. In it he asks the question, What does it mean to be fully human? Or, as he puts it, What is the highest human good? Aristotle spent the first part of the book dismissing what the world tells us is important, such as wealth and pleasure. His conclusion? Our most fully human aspiration is personal excellence, or, in his words, "activity of soul exhibiting excellence."¹

The Greek term for excellence, *arête*, is interesting. *Arête* is the act of living up to one's potential, whether it is applied to a building, an animal, or a human. The Greeks believed that all humans are born with innate potential

and that the purpose of life is to figure out what that potential is and then to act on it.

This mind-set is reflected in psychology as well. Many of you may be familiar with Abraham Maslow and his hierarchy of needs. While parts of his theory are problematic, he argues that the highest human need is self-actualization. According to Maslow, self-actualization is the need to realize our potential and our creative abilities and basically to be the best person we are capable of becoming. In short, we need to be all that we can be.

You are probably starting to see where I am going with this. We are born with unique potential that we need to fulfill during our lives. The philosopher Charles Taylor emphasized this distinct and individual need:

There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's life. But this notion gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, . . . I miss what being human is for me.²

David W. Hart was an associate professor of ethics and public management in the BYU Romney Institute of Public Management when this devotional address was given on 10 February 2015.

You have been blessed with skills, abilities, and gifts that are unique to you, and you alone. Furthermore, you have an obligation to find out what those are and then figure out how you can express them—in other words, how to imprint your uniqueness of self on the world.

A variety of philosophers, psychologists, and writers, among others, tell us what has already been revealed through the gospel of Jesus Christ: that our main purpose here on earth is to become—to become our best, but, more importantly, to become perfect, even like our Father in Heaven is perfect. This challenge is simple yet complex. We have to have a body. We need to keep the commandments. We need to fulfill certain ordinances. But along with these amazing opportunities, we also have an obligation to take full advantage of our experience here on earth.

What are your unique gifts? Are you fully developing them? Are you being all you can be? What does that even mean? Am I trying to put even more pressure on you to succeed in a world in which you are under unprecedented amounts of stress? The answer is no and yes. No, I am not trying to stress you out even more. To the contrary, my goal is to provide some direction so that you can find your singular way through the world. But yes, I do want to encourage you to be true to yourself—to your God-given potential—and to be excellent.

Being Excellent

But what did Aristotle mean by “activity of soul exhibiting excellence”? What does it mean to be all you can be? Let me provide an example. Aaron Shamy is a student in our Executive MPA program. Fifteen years ago he was one of the premiere speed climbers in the world. Speed climbers compete by scaling climbing walls as quickly as possible. It is a demanding sport, and to be the best you must be an elite athlete. It takes a tremendous amount of talent,

effort, and time to be a world champion at just about anything. At age eighteen Aaron was an X Games gold medalist, but he was also self-actualizing. These periods of self-fulfillment and personal excellence can be transformational. As Aaron said, “It was just complete exhilaration, and I was hooked from day one. . . . Rock climbing became such a foundation, a base of who I am as a person.”³ Aaron is one of the lucky ones who found his niche in which he was allowed to grow, be challenged, and realize his potential. But sports is an easy example. Personal excellence can be found in many areas of our lives.

For example, until recently I was the director of the MPA program on campus. I was consistently struck by how many of our students and alumni were drawn to the program by a deeply intrinsic pull. A common story often conveyed is that someone heard about the MPA program through a poster, a friend, or a relative, and once they learned more, “angels started singing,” meaning the idea of public service resonated on a profoundly personal level.

For certain people, careers in the public and nonprofit service will allow them to fulfill their professional potential. But the MPA is clearly not meant for everybody, just like speed climbing or being a concert violinist are not. That is part of the beauty of our Heavenly Father’s plan. We are all unique beings. But we all need to find a way to imprint our uniqueness on the world around us in some way.

Many of you are at a point in your lives in which these questions are particularly salient. I hope you all recognize the sacredness of your decisions. Many of you are not only deciding what you will be spending most of your waking hours doing but also how you will do what you decide to do. It is likely an exciting and anxiety-inducing time. While some of you will be blessed with having your calling in life laid out clearly before you, others will not. If not, your challenge is to discover the gifts that are

distinctly yours and find ways to give expression to them. So, while I strongly encourage all of you to seek fulfilling career options, I also strongly encourage you to remember that there are multiple and sometimes subtle ways to fulfill your potential as one of Heavenly Father's children. This can happen in your job, in a church calling, while raising a family, while volunteering in your community, or even while doing something as unusual as freestyle canoeing. A key message to take away from today's devotional is this: personal excellence is not about being *the* best but about being *your* best at *whatever* you choose to do.

And why are you obligated to be the best you can be? Philosophers would tell us that to be our best is the ultimate purpose of our existence—the highest human good. Psychologists would tell us that not fulfilling the highest human needs creates any number of forms of alienation, all of which are unhealthy. Sports coaches tell us that potential just means we haven't done anything yet. And finally, the gospel tells us that we are here to develop and become like our Father in Heaven. Furthermore, the scriptures state that “unto whom much is given much is required”⁴—and we all have been given much. All of these perspectives lead to the conclusion that in order to be healthy and happy in this life and in the next, we need to fully develop ourselves.

Pursuing Your Excellence: Becoming Who You Are

Finding and pursuing your unique excellence is an introspective and reflective process that should be guided by the Spirit. It is not a free ticket to be irresponsible and selfish. The world would have us believe that “finding yourself” is a self-centered journey without consequence. You do not want to rely on what the world tells you that you should do with your life—your potential is yours alone, and it is your sacred obligation to figure out what

that is and to pursue it. While there is no blueprint for success in finding and fulfilling your potential, the first step is to “know thyself.” I would like to offer five suggestions that may help you on your way. I start with practical advice and progress to gospel-centered principles that can provide personal insight and put you in a position to find your excellence and take full advantage of life's opportunities.

1. Engage

First, the practical advice: be engaged. The short answer to being engaged is giving your whole and best self to whatever you are doing. This may sound similar to the tired cliché of giving 100 percent in whatever you do, but it is more substantial than that. Let me explain. The first step to being engaged is to be fully present in whatever demands your attention. Give your total effort and attention to whatever you are doing. Even if it is a dumb homework assignment, a boring conversation with a friend, or a mind-numbing job, it is in your interest to be fully engaged and to give your best effort. Why? Because it is great practice. Being engaged puts you in tune with yourself. The less engaged you are in life, the less in touch you will be with your potential. Being engaged will teach you a lot about yourself, your interests, and where you can pursue your excellence.

While you anxiously engage in whatever you are doing, I also encourage you to seek out opportunities for deeper, more meaningful levels of engagement. The ideal form of engagement is a state of total immersion in a task that is challenging yet closely matched to your abilities. When this happens, we often lose self-consciousness. In sports it is called being “in the zone,” while some social scientists call it “flow”⁵ because it often feels like effortless movement. This can happen with physical activities, creative activities, spiritual activities, or even meaningful interactions

with others. I often find this state of immersion when I am deep in my work doing research or while teaching on a particularly good day of class, preparing for devotionals, serving others, or even skiing. Remember, however, that the most meaningful, fully human activities almost always involve betterment—making the people and environment around us better in some way.

Experiencing what some call “flow” is critical in discovering your excellence because it is during these moments that you are likely tapping into your distinct talents and abilities. As you become aware of these moments, start searching for patterns and matching them up with a humble and accurate assessment of yourself and the practical possibilities they present. It will help you along the path toward finding additional opportunities for personal growth and flow and ultimately fulfilling your potential.

2. *Seek Absence*

My second suggestion for discovering your personal excellence is to increase your self-awareness. In short, you have to know who you are before you can figure out what you are going to do with yourself. Unfortunately, you face some challenging obstacles in this process.

We live in a world of unprecedented distraction. With the advent of technology and the explosion of media in its wake, we live in an extraordinary time when we have nearly unlimited access to information, entertainment, and other people. It is truly a blessing. But it can also be a curse. As the author Michael Harris recently wrote:

*As we embrace a technology's gifts, we usually fail to consider what they ask from us in return—the subtle, hardly noticeable payments we make in exchange for their marvelous service.*⁶

So what exactly are we giving up when we submerge ourselves into our phones or other

devices? What are we being drawn away from? This author argues that we give up absence or lack. As he put it, “The daydreaming silences in our lives are filled; the burning solitudes are extinguished.”⁷ We are giving up those vital empty moments when we often and unintentionally learn about ourselves and receive spiritual promptings and other insights that only come in the space of absence from the noise in our lives. A final comment from Harris explains why this is so troublesome:

*We need . . . absences in order to think and see for ourselves. Indeed, the kinds of thoughts that present themselves in our emptiest moments—the moments when we stare out the train's windows or hover on a lawn to monitor the sky—are the only thoughts that can deliver a strange new understanding.*⁸

This strange new understanding as it relates to finding and fulfilling our potential regards insights of self-awareness for a better understanding of who we are as individuals.

My suggestion to you is to build absence into your lives. Set aside time to unplug, remove distractions, and let your mind wander. As an avid consumer of technology, this has been understandably challenging for me. I am a runner and have always listened to music to help pass the time. A year or so ago I decided to run every other time without music. It was an embarrassingly painful process, but it has been surprisingly liberating. Some of my best insights about myself and my work as well as personal revelation have come while I was running and not thinking about anything in particular. I urge you to follow the advice of Marcus Aurelius: “Allow yourself a space of quiet, wherein you can add to your knowledge of the Good and learn to curb your restlessness.”⁹ Build spaces of quiet into your lives and be patient, and I think you will be surprised by the results.

3. *Be Awe-Full*

My third suggestion to you is to be awe-full. Or, put another way, be full of awe. Make a conscious effort to find awe and wonder in the small and ordinary things of everyday life. As an example from an unimportant aspect of life, I love running in the mountains because I find so much awe in the beauty of nature. While it is easy to be blown away by a beautiful overlook, I find equal wonder in a sweet stretch of single track, the bend of a creek, or the sound of my feet crunching on a rocky trail. As a professor, it is just as easy to find awe in the contributions of students in a great class discussion or in a particularly good passage of writing. My favorite awe, however, is watching my boys grow up and become strong in the gospel.

Along these lines, I would further submit that you find awe in the spiritual side of what you do. Earnestly seek to see and appreciate the Lord's hand in your life, because it is everywhere around you. It is easy to see the Lord's handiwork in nature, but I encourage you to search for the same kind of awe in all of the Lord's creations, whether that be in the people you interact with at school or work or even in the more menial tasks that we do every day. All of us are tremendously blessed in ways we may not fully realize, and we all benefit even more when we recognize the Lord's influence in our lives.

The point is that in today's world it is tougher and tougher to be awed by ordinary things. Make an extra effort to find awe in the everyday aspects of your life and take a moment to say, "Wow!" In so doing, your senses will be heightened and, in turn, will reveal more about you as well as additional opportunities to apply your uniqueness.

4. *Be Selfless*

My fourth suggestion to you on your quest to knowing yourself and your unique

excellence is to be selfless. As I mentioned earlier, the world would have us think that finding who you are in this life is an intensely selfish journey in which your personal happiness trumps everything. The irony of this attitude is that it is just the opposite that not only leads to personal happiness but also reveals a lot about who we are as individuals.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is completely grounded in selflessness. The Atonement of our Savior was the ultimate act of selflessness. The Lord voluntarily took upon Himself the sins of the world so that we can return to the presence of our Heavenly Father. The basic principles of the Church on the earth today are also grounded in selflessness. Some of those principles include preaching the gospel, building up our fellow Saints, participating in temple work, and caring for the needy. All of these at their very base require selflessness on our part. And we all know that when we do these things we are happiest and at our best.

An example from a recent prophet illustrates this point. Several years ago the Church produced a documentary on the prophet Gordon B. Hinckley. One part focused on his time as a missionary. President Hinckley described how, like many of us, he struggled with homesickness and his effectiveness as a missionary. He sent a letter home in which he shared his doubts and discouragement. His father sent a brief letter in return that said, "I have only one suggestion: forget yourself and go to work."

The next day in scripture study Elder Hinckley happened to read a powerful message:

He said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it.¹⁰

It may seem counterintuitive to some that you find yourself when you lose yourself. While these verses are laden with meaning, the relevance here is twofold. First, forget yourself and go to work. Throw yourself into whatever you are doing. The less time we spend “pacing up and down within the cell of our circumstance,”¹¹ the more likely it is that we will find meaning in what we are doing. President Hinckley blossomed as a missionary shortly after committing to lose himself in the work. In fact, he stated that this was a life-changing moment.

Second, selflessness keeps us grounded as we seek to find and exercise our personal excellence. If one were to get too caught up in finding his or her potential, it could be easy to become self-absorbed and put important relationships in jeopardy. Returning to the speed climber Aaron Shamy, he stated that one of the reasons he left competitive climbing was because he saw that to continue to be the best speed climber, he would risk sacrificing family relationships and other critical priorities.¹² The Lord challenges us to lose ourselves so that we can have the attitudes that will keep us grounded, humble, and open to learning. In losing ourselves, we learn about ourselves—and that insight provides invaluable perspective in finding our excellence.

5. Be Compassionate

My final suggestion is to be compassionate. Several years ago my wife, Lisa, and I attended a regional conference in which Elder Robert D. Hales spoke. He spent an hour talking about a single scripture in the book of Jude: “And of some have compassion, making a difference.”¹³ He noted that there are two essential parts to compassion: feeling and doing. These are both very relevant to the topic at hand.

Feeling is the capacity to feel what others feel. This is also known as empathy. The economist Adam Smith gave a great definition of empathy: “The person . . . must . . . endeavour,

as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer.”¹⁴ This is perhaps best demonstrated through the most compassionate person during the most compassionate act. One of the key actions of the Atonement was Christ’s suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was there that He suffered through every feeling in every situation. Because of that, Christ is truly the most compassionate being because He can actually relate to every possible circumstance we encounter. By extension, a critical part of our development is learning to have empathy—to feel.

But true compassion does not stop there. Doing means actually acting on those feelings. Not coincidentally, the best model is again our Savior. A classic but common example is found in John, when Christ raised Lazarus from the dead. He came to the grieving family, and when He saw their grief, “he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled.”¹⁵ He also wept with the family. He was feeling. And then He acted: He asked to be taken to Lazarus, and, with great faith, He raised him from the dead.

There are myriad examples like this in the scriptures. Being dialed into your feelings of empathy and acting on them is also necessary to find your excellence. Compassion is an indispensable part of personal growth that will reveal much about your distinct set of skills and what types of situations will allow you to better the people and environment around you.

Conclusion

In conclusion, recognize that as a child of your Father in Heaven, you have been given a unique set of talents, abilities, and gifts and that you have an obligation to develop them so that you can bless the lives of those around you. For most of us, however, finding our excellence and acting on it doesn’t just

happen—it needs to be a thoughtful, systematic process. If you follow the suggestions I have offered and combine them with earnest prayer and pondering, they can provide you with the insight needed to see where and possibly how you can maximize your potential and leave your indelible mark in the world.

If you don't "know thyself" and act on it, you will not be taking advantage of those sacred gifts. A philosopher said, "Hell is when the man that is comes face to face with the man that might have been." I think all of us would like to avoid that realization. So engage life, create time for absence, find reasons to say "Wow!" and selflessly serve others with love and compassion and you will learn a lot about yourself and the gifts that have been bestowed upon you.

Finally, remember the words of superhero philosopher Peter Parker in the first *Spider-Man* movie, that "with great power comes great responsibility." What is that responsibility? It is not just to act but to find out what is uniquely yours and give expression to it. Spend your time here at BYU learning about who you really are and preparing yourselves to have an impact on the world. Then go and do. Be excellent and make a difference.

I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), book 1, chapter 7.

2. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (New

Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 30; emphasis in original.

3. Aaron Shamy, in "New Heights: Former Pro Climber Chooses Church, Family," Monday Close-Up, *Daily Herald*, 11 January 2015, heraldextra.com/news/local/monday-close-up-former-pro-climber-chooses-church-family/article_ff8cd46f-b08e-52d0-b3e3-026d434c6a66.html.

4. D&C 82:3.

5. See Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

6. Michael Harris, *The End of Absence: Reclaiming What We've Lost in a World of Constant Connection* (New York: Current, 2014), 14.

7. Harris, *The End of Absence*, 8.

8. Harris, *The End of Absence*, 203.

9. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (New York: Dorset Press, 1964, 1986), book 2, paragraph 7.

10. Mark 8:34–35; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Gordon B. Hinckley: Documentary* (2013), 11:15–12:40, lds.org/media-library/video/2013-05-1290-gordon-b-hinckley-documentary?lang=eng; see also Gordon B. Hinckley, "Taking the Gospel to Britain: A Declaration of Vision, Faith, Courage, and Truth," *Ensign*, July 1987.

11. Neal A. Maxwell, "Endure It Well," *Ensign*, May 1990.

12. See Aaron Shamy, in "New Heights."

13. Jude 1:22.

14. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Liberty Classics, 1976), 21.

15. John 11:33.