

The Truth of All Things

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When I was ten or eleven years old, my twin brother and I went on a hike up the mountain just north of Y Mountain. Together, with a few friends, we woke up early and climbed straight up the face and then scampered across the top to the peak overlooking Rock Canyon.

On our way back down we ran into a small rattlesnake. Being the excitable kids we were, we surrounded the poor creature and wouldn't let it escape. We became so bold as to pick it up by the tail as it would try to slither away. We'd hold it for a second or two and then drop it when our nerves gave in. The potentially deadly consequence of our actions didn't deter us from our foolishness.

When we got home, my mother asked me if everything went okay on the hike. I mumbled something about a rattlesnake. She then related to me that at about the same time we would have been fooling around with the snake, she had received a strong impression that we were in danger. She had knelt and prayed for us. I was astonished. How did she know we were in trouble? This is my earliest recollection of what has become many experiences in which my mother received specific inspiration from the Holy Ghost in the very moment she needed it. At the time it seemed mysterious to me—this

idea of the companionship of the Holy Ghost. I wondered how it really worked. I understood that the Holy Ghost was a personage of spirit, but I puzzled over how He could be helping everyone at once.

Years later, during my freshman year at BYU, I found myself sitting in a Physics 122 class. One day we were discussing the theoretical limit of the speed of light—about 300,000,000 meters per second. For the non-physics majors, that's more than 670 million miles per hour.

The professor said, "It is the maximum speed at which all energy, matter, and information in the universe can travel." Then he paused and said, "But we know of something faster—the speed of prayer." He reasoned that if God has a body as tangible as man's, then He occupies a discreet place in the universe. And we believe we can instantaneously communicate with Him. So there must be something faster than the speed of light.

Again I found myself reflecting upon the nature of the power of the Holy Ghost. Keep in mind that this was in 1985, so there was no

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Internet and there were no smartphones or wireless networks that convey data all over the world to millions of people simultaneously in a matter of seconds. Today, with our current experience, it doesn't even stretch our minds to imagine technology that is capable of sending instantaneous and personalized messages to millions—even billions—of people at the same time.

Celestial Technology

Today I'd like to discuss just a few of the things I have learned since my youth about the power of the Holy Ghost and the nature of truth. Obviously this won't be a complete treatise on the Holy Ghost but a personal reflection. I humbly add my testimony to that of Moroni, who declared, "And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of *all things*."¹ I probably quoted this scripture a thousand times as a missionary and mostly thought of it in the context of knowing the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. But this last part of Moroni's promise is a very compelling statement that opens up a world of possibilities: How do we enable the revelatory power of the Holy Ghost? What kind of truth does the Holy Ghost reveal? What exactly is included in "all things"?

Our world is now filling up with smartphones, smart TVs, smart cars, and smart appliances—and, coming soon, smart glasses, watches, and clothing. This connected technology is adaptive and dynamic and is becoming ever present. Websites, apps, and mobile devices track your every move. Every click, every piece of content you look at, how long you engage with it, your location, and just about anything and everything else is recorded. This information is sent every few seconds to massive data centers and is used to predict and then influence your future behavior. The trend toward more personal technological integration is increasing and will yield technology in the future that will be as

startling to you as the smartphone is to your grandparents. It is amazing and alarming at the same time.

But as impressive as modern technology is, we have access to a celestial communication network that is infinitely more pure and capable than man's smartest technology. It has unlimited bandwidth, is infinitely fast, is personalized to every soul, and has no societal or personal downside. You can listen to me today—and I will say a few things that you will most likely forget—but through the power of the Holy Ghost you can receive a message that is specifically for you. This message will not be based upon your past behavior or your preferences but will be based upon what the Lord knows you need and will be presented to your mind in the context of your life and your future behavior. It will occupy a special place in your consciousness—a place where it can be recalled quickly in the very moment you need it. And it will come to you with the requirement that you act upon it. I hope you will be open to the specific thoughts the Holy Ghost may put in your mind over the next twenty minutes.

My mission president said something to me right before I left the mission field that I didn't fully appreciate at the time. He said to the group of us departing missionaries, "You see things more clearly now than you will until midlife." Well, here I am twenty-five years later, at midlife, finally understanding what he meant. He meant that as missionaries we had been in a special situation where our personal righteousness and our desire to do God's will aligned in a way that is difficult to achieve outside the mission field. Consequently we had enjoyed the influence and companionship of the Holy Ghost more fully than we would again until midlife. And he was right. You come home and pursue your education; you worry about your finances and your social life; and then come your spouse, your children, and your career. It's a struggle to manage all the priorities and all the distractions.

Be Specific

Missionaries know that the first law of heaven—and of missionary success—is obedience. Righteousness and truth are inseparably connected.² I learned that when I was obedient, when I was trying my best to be righteous, I had a valid expectation to have the companionship of the Holy Ghost. I also learned that I had to explicitly ask for specific guidance. Let me repeat that: *explicitly* ask for *specific* guidance. You have to ask because God is no respecter of persons—He loves all His children and has repeatedly told them, “Ask, and ye shall receive”;³ “seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.”⁴ Asking is an important part of the law that governs receiving. And not only should we ask, but we should ask for specifics. Like President Thomas S. Monson has often said, “When we deal in generalities, we rarely have success; but when we deal in specifics, we rarely have a failure.”⁵ As a missionary I learned to pray for very specific things.

Then I came home from my mission and life got busy. School and marriage followed quickly, and I became very focused on my future. Over time my prayers gradually slipped back into generalities. Why does that happen? Do we think the details of our lives are too mundane for the Lord? Or do we just become lazy?

My thinking changed one day while I was sitting in a mechanical engineering seminar my junior year. I remember it clearly. The professor, Carl Sorenson, said something to the effect of, “You students here at BYU should become the smartest engineers in the world. Not only do you have the best professors, but you have the gift of the Holy Ghost to help you learn truth.” That’s right! Like Moroni said, “The truth of all things.”

I thought to myself, “You mean to tell me that I can pray about calculus, physics, thermodynamics, heat transfer, and fluid mechanics?” Yes! All those topics are covered under “the truth of all things” clause.

From that time forward I began being more specific in my prayers. I prayed over individual homework problems, assignments, and principles. And while I don’t remember hearing a voice or receiving some great manifestation, I would often wake up in the morning with more clarity than I had the night before. I learned that when I combined my best efforts with very specific pondering and prayer, things went better—much better. And the truths of some things were made manifest to me by the power of the Holy Ghost. I wholeheartedly recommend the practice of being very specific in your personal prayers and avoiding the generalities that so easily turn into vain repetition.

A few years ago I attended a priesthood leadership training session over which President Boyd K. Packer was presiding. His topic was revelation, and he had us open the hymnbook and read the words to “Come unto Him.”⁶ I had never sung or read this hymn before, but I really appreciate the message it contains about the nature of revelation. It reads:

*I wander through the still of night,
When solitude is ev’rywhere—
Alone, beneath the starry light,
And yet I know that God is there.
I kneel upon the grass and pray;
An answer comes without a voice.
It takes my burden all away
And makes my aching heart rejoice.*

*When I am filled with strong desire
And ask a boon of him, I see
No miracle of living fire,
But what I ask flows into me.
And when the tempest rages high
I feel no arm around me thrust,
But ev’ry storm goes rolling by
When I repose in him my trust.*

What I understood from President Packer’s explanation of this hymn was that even when

we feel alone and “feel no arm around” us, the answers do eventually come “without a voice,” the storms do go “rolling by,” and life’s most important lessons are learned. Truth usually distills upon our souls like the morning dew—imperceptibly.

Yield to the Enticings

In the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord repeatedly counsels missionaries to “open your mouths and spare not”⁷ and to “speak the thoughts that I shall put into your hearts,” with the promise that “it shall be given you . . . in the very moment, what ye shall say.”⁸ I believe there is a key here to enabling the power of the Holy Ghost. When we are doing our best to keep the commandments, then our *first* thoughts and *first* impressions are often the inspired ones. I have observed this phenomenon many times in my life.

Here’s a typical scenario at my house. Let’s call it the parable of the messy basement. After a long day of work I come home and find that every friend in the neighborhood has been at my house playing in our basement. The couch pillows are piled at the bottom of the stairs (to accommodate base jumping from the landing), every toy from the toy closet is on the floor, the blankets are all over the place—you get the picture. Something inside of me softly says, “Go join in the fun. Play with the kids. Don’t make a big deal about the mess. You can clean it up later.” This is the first thought that comes—from the heart, from my best self—and it is inspired.

But then something else kicks in—a second thought, a more “natural” response: “Wait a minute. I’ve been working all day. I shouldn’t have to clean this up. Haven’t these kids learned anything? I better teach them a lesson. Where’s my wife?” Well, I can tell you from experience that option number two, in any of its various forms, never works out as initially conceived. Just follow the first impression. It’s usually the right one—the one that leads

to more Christlike behavior. King Benjamin called this yielding “to the enticings of the Holy Spirit,” putting off the natural man, and becoming like a child.⁹ When we learn to heed the promptings of the Holy Ghost, these feelings become stronger and more frequent.

Joseph Smith said to John Taylor (as recorded by John Taylor):

*Elder Taylor, you have been baptized, you have had hands laid upon your head for the reception of the Holy Ghost, and you have been ordained to the holy priesthood. Now, if you will continue to follow the leadings of that spirit, it will always lead you right. Sometimes it might be contrary to your judgment; never mind that, follow its dictates; and if you be true to its whisperings it will in time become in you a principle of revelation so that you will know all things.*¹⁰

Alma explained the process of spiritual growth this way:

*It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the **heed and diligence** which they give unto him.*

*And therefore, he that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word; and he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full.*¹¹

Heed and diligence are like the Lord’s encryption technology. The mind of the Lord, as taught by the Holy Ghost, is only revealed to those who are willing to act. This is the “sincere heart” and “real intent”¹² that Moroni says are prerequisite to having the truth of the Book of Mormon manifest by the power of the Holy Ghost. As missionaries we observe that the truths of the gospel are protected, or hidden,

from the insincere or unprepared. Just asking “Is the Book of Mormon true?” or “Is Joseph Smith a true prophet?” is not enough. Those who are truly not willing to heed heavenly counsel rarely receive it. If the unprepared were not kept from the mysteries, as Alma put it, then they would stand condemned before the Lord, having refused the light offered them. This is the case for sign seekers—those who want a manifestation who do not have real intent. The Lord said:

Behold, here is the agency of man, and here is the condemnation of man; because that which was from the beginning is plainly manifest unto them, and they receive not the light.

*And every man whose spirit receiveth not the light is under condemnation.*¹³

Agency Drives the Show

So let’s recap a little: We need to be righteous so that we have a valid claim upon the companionship of the Holy Ghost. We need to ask for specifics in our prayers and ponderings. We need to recognize and act upon the enticings of the Spirit, which are often given as our first impressions “in the very moment” of need.

But there will be other moments throughout our lives when we will be left unto ourselves,¹⁴ when we may not recognize the promptings of the Spirit. Remember that mortality is a probationary state—a time to learn and a time to become more like the Savior by exercising our agency. There are many circumstances in which the Lord leaves it completely up to us. He wants to see if we are learning to act for ourselves. He wants to measure the gap between our will and His will. The Holy Ghost is our guide, not our chauffeur, through life. The Lord said:

Men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness;

*For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves.*¹⁵

Elder Bruce R. McConkie said during a BYU devotional: “Well, maybe it will be a little shock to you, but never in my life did I ever ask the Lord whom I ought to marry. It never occurred to me to ask him. I went out and found the girl I wanted.”¹⁶ She happened to be the prophet’s daughter, Amelia Smith. Elder McConkie’s point wasn’t that we shouldn’t counsel with the Lord over life’s big decisions; instead, he was emphasizing the important role that our own agency plays. He further said:

*And so we’re faced with two propositions. One is that we ought to be guided by the spirit of inspiration, the spirit of revelation. The other is that we’re here under a direction to use our agency, to determine what we ought to do on our own; and we need to strike a fine balance between these two.*¹⁷

Thus life is a complex mixture of circumstance, environment, and agency. But still there are some who blame God or deny His existence because of the suffering and injustice they see in the world. They lack the proper perspective and understanding of the central role that agency plays in the plan of salvation. My experience has been that the hardest questions in life—questions about cruelty, war, injustice, inequality, abuse, disability, death, and all of these tough situations—are best understood in the context of man’s agency, both individually and collectively. In Doctrine and Covenants 58 the Lord said:

I command and men obey not; I revoke and they receive not the blessing.

*Then they say in their hearts: This is not the work of the Lord, for his promises are not fulfilled. But wo unto such, for their reward lurketh beneath, and not from above.*¹⁸

We believe in God’s omniscience, that all things are present before Him and He sees them all.¹⁹ But we do not believe in determinism. We believe that the dominant feature of mortality is the agency of man, and it drives the show here on earth and in the eternities.

Truth Through Trials

Some truth can only be discovered through trial and hardship and over a long time. We have a choice about life’s trials. We can choose to draw close to the Lord, trust in Him, and learn something of His character and ours, or we can just suffer. I like how Lehi explained it to his young son Jacob. He said:

Thou art my first-born in the days of my tribulation in the wilderness. . . .

*Nevertheless, Jacob . . . , thou knowest the greatness of God; and he shall **consecrate thine afflictions for thy gain.***

*Wherefore, thy soul shall be blessed.*²⁰

I really like the phrase “consecrate thine afflictions for thy gain.” It gives me perspective about the purpose of mortality.

When I was five years old, my father and his brother were killed in a tragic plane crash in Alberta, Canada, leaving my mother to raise nine children on her own. I remember being told at the time that God had called my dad on a mission to the spirit world and that’s why his plane crashed. God caused my Dad’s plane to crash? While I’m sure the intent behind saying something like that was good, it made no sense to me, and I have learned for myself that this is not true. God’s foreknowledge of things is not the same as His causing all things to happen. We don’t need to attribute cause to ascribe meaning. Did God cause it? No. But was He keenly aware of my family’s circumstance? Yes. Was there great meaning in the trial of our lives? Yes.

I testify, like Lehi, that “all things have been done in the wisdom of him who *knoweth* all

things,”²¹ which is not the same as *causeth* all things. Somehow the Lord helped turn the tragedy of my father’s death into a blessing for my family. I grew up knowing absolutely that my family was covered by the power of the priesthood and temple covenants. It felt like a current blessing, not a future one, to me. I learned many more lessons because I grew up an orphan—all of which I count as great blessings in retrospect.

Information Glut and Digital Noise

So here we are living on this earth, working out our salvation. Our challenge is to learn to distinguish between good and evil, between truth and error, and to make our choices. Our Father hasn’t altogether left us, and we have the right to the companionship of the Holy Ghost to help guide us. Learning to enable the influence of the Holy Ghost is critically important.

Speaking of the days that lie in our future, the Lord said:

And at that day, when I shall come in my glory, shall the parable be fulfilled which I spake concerning the ten virgins.

*For they that are wise and have received the truth, and have taken the Holy Spirit for their guide, and have not been deceived—verily I say unto you, they shall not be hewn down and cast into the fire, but shall abide the day.*²²

Those who will abide the day of the Lord’s coming will have taken the Holy Spirit to be their guide. However, we live in a day when there are many competing sources of information that challenge the relevance of eternal truth. Our society suffers from information glut. We receive constant “feeds” of information that are mostly devoid of context and meaning. Information flies at us indiscriminately from a myriad of sources. This modern truth requires no action on our part, except maybe to hit the “Like” button once

in a while. The war in Afghanistan, the latest political intrigue, the weather tomorrow, the NBA playoffs, that funny YouTube video, and the most recent post on Facebook all occupy the same informational strata: “Amusing, but no action required.” We mostly skip along the surface, rarely diving deep into a matter, because the sheer volume of information we are processing dictates such behavior. There just isn’t time. And the relevance of the content—as it is usually referred to now—is judged solely by what is “most popular” or “most recent.”

But real truth has never been judged on those merits. Eternal truth is a view of things as they really are.²³ It is also transactional—meaning that there is an attached responsibility to act upon it, to integrate it. Remember the HD encryption technology the Lord uses: **Heed and Diligence!** It’s built into the system. We cannot hope to have more truth than we have now unless we apply what we already know.

Besides information glut, there are other potential challenges to enabling the power of the Holy Ghost that I didn’t face twenty-five years ago. I have a theory about the general shape of the learning curve—something I recognized as a college student. It is shaped like an S.

On a graph, this S-shaped learning curve shows the relationship between the amount of continuous, uninterrupted time we devote to something and the output quality of that endeavor. Whenever we undertake a task or begin a project or an assignment, there is a certain amount of start-up time required to get acclimated (the bottom of the S). Then we eventually get into “the zone” (the middle to the top of the S), where every unit of time we spend yields more output (i.e., new knowledge) than was possible during start-up mode. In the zone we dive deep, and we become totally immersed in focused thought. The key is to get into the zone quickly and stay

there as long as possible. But in today’s connected world we are constantly interrupted by buzzing, beeping, and ringing notifications that we assume require an immediate reaction. Hyper attention to digital noise causes us to slide right back down the learning curve, forever stuck in start-up mode—the area of the learning curve where our efforts are the least productive.

We are being conditioned to react in a certain way to digital stimulus, and this rewiring of our brains is not without consequence. We are developing a form of societal attention deficit disorder. A recent study revealed that the average person checks their phone 150 times per day, or every six and a half minutes.²⁴ Some sociologists are just now beginning to examine the potential consequences of this behavior. In his book *Present Shock*, Douglas Rushkoff wrote:

We tend to exist in a distracted present, where forces on the periphery are magnified and those immediately before us are ignored. Our ability to create a plan—much less follow through on it—is undermined by our need to be able to improvise our way through any number of external impacts that stand to derail us at any moment. Instead of finding a stable foothold in the here and now, we end up reacting to the ever-present assault of simultaneous impulses and commands.²⁵

There are many advocates for new technology and maybe not enough who are examining the other end of that stick. I am certainly not against technology—far from it. But I am for the deliberate use of technology and the careful consideration of all its consequences. And I am worried that the companionship we have with our smartphones is competing with the companionship of the Holy Ghost. This potentially harmful situation is created when we forget that there are “things to act and things to be acted upon.”²⁶ We ourselves are the things that act. Technology is a thing

to be acted upon—by us. If we allow that role to become reversed, and we find ourselves mostly reacting to our technology, then watch out! We might be holding a rattlesnake by the tail and not even realize the danger!

Don't just ingest whatever comes your way via text, email, data feeds, streams, and notifications. Make a conscious choice. You decide what, when, and how you are going to interact digitally. The next time you download an app and it asks you if you want to enable push notifications, really think about what you are agreeing to. Don't get trapped in a compulsion loop that keeps you from the important tasks and people right in front of you. Consider carving out some digital quiet time each day. Sometimes you need to disconnect and be completely alone so that you can commune with God and receive the truth He wants to reveal through the power of the Holy Ghost. Moses understood the importance of climbing the mountain to get away from the din of the herd.

In conclusion, I'd like to tell you something Joseph Smith once said about the gift of the Holy Ghost:

*I have an old edition of the New Testament in the Latin, Hebrew, German and Greek languages. . . . I thank God that I have got this old book; but I thank him more for the gift of the Holy Ghost. . . . The Holy Ghost . . . is within me, and comprehends more than all the world; and I will associate myself with him.*²⁷

We might say in our hearts something similar: I have this smartphone in my pocket. It can do some amazing things, and I am thankful for it. But I am more impressed by and thankful for the gift of the Holy Ghost. He is smarter than all the world, and I will associate myself with Him.

May we embrace that association, I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Moroni 10:5; emphasis added.
2. See D&C 93:28.
3. 3 Nephi 27:29.
4. Matthew 7:7.
5. Thomas S. Monson, "Seven Steps to Success with Aaronic Priesthood Youth," *Ensign*, February 1985, 24; see also Monson, "The Aaronic Priesthood Pathway," *Ensign*, November 1984, 43; and Monson, "The Priesthood—A Sacred Trust," *Ensign*, May 1994, 50.
6. *Hymns*, 2002, no. 114.
7. D&C 33:9.
8. D&C 100:5–6.
9. Mosiah 3:19.
10. John Taylor, *Deseret News: Semi-Weekly*, 15 January 1878, 1; quoted in *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: John Taylor* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001), 153.
11. Alma 12:9–10; emphasis added.
12. Moroni 10:4.
13. D&C 93:31–32.
14. See Moses 1:9.
15. D&C 58:27–28; emphasis added.
16. Bruce R. McConkie, "Agency or Inspiration—Which?" BYU devotional address, 27 February 1973.
17. McConkie, "Agency or Inspiration."
18. D&C 58:32–33.
19. See D&C 38:2; Moses 1:6.
20. 2 Nephi 2:1–3; emphasis added.
21. 2 Nephi 2:24; emphasis added.
22. D&C 45:56–57.
23. See D&C 93:24.
24. See Hugh Everett, "Study: People Check Their Cell Phones Every Six Minutes, 150 Times a Day," *Elite Daily*, 11 February 2013, elitedaily.com/news/world/study-people-check-cell-phones-minutes-150-times-day; see also Elizabeth Cohen, "Do You Obsessively Check Your Smartphone?" *CNN Health*, 28 July 2011, cnn.com/2011/HEALTH/07/28/ep.smartphone.obsessed.cohen/index.html;

Britney Fitzgerald, "Americans Addicted to Checking Smartphones, Would 'Panic' if They Lost Device (Study)," *The Huffington Post*, 21 June 2012, huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/21/americans-are-addicted-to-smartphones_n_1615293.html.

25. Douglas Rushkoff, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now* (New York: Current, 2013), 4.

26. 2 Nephi 2:14.

27. HC 6:307–8; *Teachings*, 349–50.