

“Never Take No Cutoffs” or “You Have Nothing to Fear From the Journey”

ELAINE L. JACK

I appreciate that introduction given so you will know who I am. Recently I went to the welfare cannery with my ward to do pears. I sat by, and visited with, a nice woman from another stake. After about twenty minutes of conversation, she looked at me and said, “You remind me so much of Elaine Jack. Has anyone ever told you that before?” I said, “Actually, more people tell me I am like my sister” and then confessed I was Elaine Jack. I am glad to be here.

Every time I visit this campus I marvel at the enormous force for good you represent. You are the leaders who will shape this world for years to come. You are indeed being prepared for a most hazardous journey. I assure you that Elisha’s counsel to his young comrades as they faced what appeared to be overwhelming odds holds true today: “They that be with us are more than they that be with them” (2 Kings 6:16).

It is your journey ahead that I would like to address—the journey that will require careful planning and execution, wise use of your resources, and constant reliance on and dedication to eternal principles.

Nearly one hundred fifty years ago, a small band of settlers organized under George and

Jacob Donner set out on a journey to a better life. At first their trek was typical of the scenes that had been played out time and again as pioneers made their way west to the rich lands of opportunity. But this was a misguided effort flawed by mistakes and misjudgments. Indeed, the Donner party was one of the most tragic dramas in the history of America.

The party included an assemblage of folks from Illinois, Missouri, Tennessee, Iowa, and Ohio. Of the ninety men, women, and children who began the trek, forty-two died; and those who lived struggled the rest of their lives with the effects of exposure, starvation, and wrenching memories. Their journey left an account for history that will never be forgotten.

The Donner party made their way to Fort Bridger, Wyoming, with little fanfare. But then they succumbed to the lure of a quicker, but unproven, route to California charted by a man named Lansford W. Hastings. Instead of the much-traveled course around the rugged Sierra mountains and then down to the

Elaine L. Jack was Relief Society general president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 16 November 1993.

California coast, the Donner party chose to go south through the Wasatch Mountains, down Echo Canyon, across the salt flats on the south side of the Great Salt Lake, and over the deserts of northern Nevada. They intended to clear the mountain pass near the present site of Reno, Nevada, before the snows fell.

Such was the outline for the journey, but they never made it. They got within one day of the last mountain pass before meeting with final disaster. What happened?

In May 1847, shortly after her rescue from the snowbound encampment near what is now Donner Lake, twelve-year-old survivor Virginia Reed wrote to her cousin in Illinois this message: “Never take no cutoffs and hurry along as fast as you can” (quoted in George R. Stewart, *Ordeal by Hunger: The Story of the Donner Party* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960], p. 361).

We can learn much from Virginia and the historical accounts of the ill-fated journey. Many of the settlers, not able to part with their material luxuries of home, brought an excess of possessions that slowed the progress of the entire company. Factions splintered the group into camps of “us” and “them.” Before the party reached the Sierras, one of the members had killed another.

The single worst factor was taking an unproven shortcut. When Virginia said, “Don’t take no shortcuts”, she knew what she was talking about. The Hastings Cutoff was supposed to save as much as 300 miles, but the path led into a blind canyon. What reportedly would take a week took thirty days. Things just got worse. The stretch across the salt flats was almost twice the distance indicated, not forty but seventy miles. They had too few provisions and too little water for themselves and their animals.

Finally, upon reaching the towering Sierra Nevada range, they rested. They squandered their last week of good weather gathering strength for the final days. Had they not

stopped they would have been only a footnote in the history of the developing West. But it snowed.

The party was one day short of clearing the pass when early storms in late October buried them in snow depths of more than twenty feet. They built crude shelters of logs, rocks, and hides, and ate twigs, mice, their animals that did not run away, and then their own shoes. Finally, some of them resorted to eating the dead. Four rescue parties worked their way in from the west that winter and spring to save those who were miraculously still alive.

Today, I want you to look at your journey. There are several lessons to be learned from the Donner party that have nothing to do with wagon trains and everything to do with exaltation. For you, the stakes are higher than a home in the untamed West. Your destination is eternal glory.

Lesson One: “Never Take No Cutoffs”

The Donner party took a shortcut, an unproven one at that. Beverly Sills, a famous musician familiar with the rigor of working to get someplace has said, “There are no shortcuts to anyplace worth going.” She was right. To be marooned in the middle of the mountains was not the destination of the Donners.

Our journey is clearly defined, the path well marked, the pitfalls noted. But the Lord is wise. He knows he must prove us, for he says, “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves” (Matthew 10:16).

We are not only here to learn, we are here to test that learning. That phase of this earthly journey was outlined from the beginning, for the scriptures tell us, “Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man” (Luke 2:52). He learned, like you are learning in this great institution dedicated to bringing forth righteous leaders.

For the Donner party there was a proven trail. It was longer, but it was sure. Gambling on their own abilities and personal ambitions,

they took a road that had never been tested. The result is history.

The Lord says, “Enter ye in at the strait gate: . . . Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matthew 7:13–14).

As you follow the path of the Savior, keeping your covenants and his commandments, you will be assaulted from all sides with offers to take other roads, other travel packages. Anything the adversary can do to pull you off course, he will do. He’ll stop at nothing to catch your attention, and then, ever so slyly, he will lead you away from the work of the Lord.

This is the dispensation of the fullness of times. We have been given the fullness of the gospel. To entice us from the path, Satan suggests a salad bar of sin—a little here and a little there until the plate is piled high and the price is paid. Knowing of his style and cunning, we must “press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14).

There are some who are not satisfied with the peace that comes from the Lord. Seeking to find gratification in places other than in holy settings, they hang out—usually on a limb—and play into the hands of Satan and his evil designs. “Stand ye in holy places,” we are told, for the road back from sin is a long one (see D&C 87:8).

Some break what they view as the lesser commandments, hoping that these will only be minor deductions in the final exam. They don’t keep the Sabbath day holy, they invite temptation, they seek release from the pressures of school with drugs or alcohol, they don’t fulfill their callings. They lie—just a little; they cheat—just when they need to; and they miss church meetings—only when they’re tired.

“Never take no cutoffs” means to enter in at the strait gate, my brothers and sisters, and to stay on the strait and narrow path. Such devotion to the Lord’s cause is difficult. But

know that just as the Donner party set off with the best of intentions, you too can be led into blind canyons and forced to cross treacherous desert sands when you have strayed.

In this audience are some of the best the Lord has on this earth. You are here at BYU as part of your prescribed journey. President Benson has counseled that “Intelligence, or light and truth, becomes a vital force in our eternal journey” (*TETB*, p. 302).

This gathering of Saints is a sampling of the strength of the Lord’s force for righteousness in the last days. Does that give you pause? As a group you are capable of mighty works, but each of you must go forth on the journey as did Moroni, whose

heart did swell with thanksgiving to his God, for the many privileges and blessings which he bestowed upon his people; a man who did labor exceedingly for the welfare and safety of his people.

Yea, and he was a man who was firm in the faith of Christ. [Alma 48:12–13]

With such devotion there are no sidesteps, no missteps. My dear young friends, there are no shortcuts to eternity.

Lesson Two: Travel Light

One of the families in the Donner party was unable to leave behind their cherished personal belongings. They had a specially built wagon twice the size of a typical Conestoga to carry their treasures across the wilderness. But the wagon was slow, cumbersome, and difficult to maneuver. Ultimately it was abandoned on the salt flats as water and rations became far more valuable than tables and chairs.

Reflect on the counsel of the Savior to the young man who asked, “Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?” The Savior listed all the basic commandments, then next we read:

The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?

Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me."

But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions. [Matthew 19:16–22]

Are we willing to leave behind the world to become like God? Worldly comforts may temporarily minimize the impact of our struggles here on earth; they may give us comfort and a sense of importance, even a measure of success. But such reliance on material possessions deprives us of reliance upon our Heavenly Father and his saving grace. Our spiritual growth comes from seeing the Lord's hand in our lives. There is little comparison between a worldly check register and our account in the Lamb's book of life.

Lesson Three: Contention, Strife, Anger, and Derision Thwart Our Progress

Relationships with one another are sacred trusts. That's why we call each other brother and sister. We are indeed the closest of companions on this journey. Respect, honor, love, and humility are the basics for living with the Father. To practice and refine these traits here is to be in touch with the eternities today.

Reading the Book of Mormon puts clearly in front of us the debilitating nature of contention. The prophet Jacob mourned the dissension rampant among the people. At the end of his life he wrote,

I conclude this record . . . by saying that the time passed away with us, and also our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers, cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation, in a wilderness, and hated of our brethren, which caused wars and

contentions; wherefore, we did mourn out our days. [Jacob 7:26]

Then we read of a happier people who had just been visited by the Savior. Wrote the prophet Nephi,

And it came to pass that there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people.

And there were no envyings, nor strifes, nor tumults, nor whoredoms, nor lyings, nor murders, nor any manner of lasciviousness; and surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God. [4 Nephi 1:15–16]

Anger and friction delayed and divided the Donner party on their journey. Such discord led, in part, to their temporal tragedy. Satan loves dissension in any form. He encourages harsh feelings, angry words, ruthless judgments, scorn, pride, and the cruelest of actions.

Our greatest teacher and example on this point is Jesus Christ. To those unbelievers, those who wished him harm, those who plotted his capture and even his death, Jesus Christ showed mercy and compassion, charity and love that never wavered. No unkind words passed his lips. His behavior was always becoming of the King of Kings. What did the Lord say from the cross to those who jeered at him, spit upon him and called him names? "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

May we, too, forgive and love and honor each other on this journey.

Lesson Four: "Hurry Along as Fast as You Can"

The Donner party showed us the risks of taking our time. We have no time to lose—or even time to take it easy. I love the old Chinese saying, "Man who sit with legs crossed and

mouth open waiting for roast duck to fly in have long hunger.”

We can’t sit. We can’t wait. The Donners waited, and the snows came, and their journey was a tragedy.

Recently, the administration here at BYU instituted a new policy to help students “hurry along” in their college training. This is not to deprive or limit an education, but instead it encourages you to focus on this season of your life. The new approach is designed to keep students from loading up on unneeded courses, encourages planning early, and increases the odds that a student will “graduate.” This is good advice applied to any task at any time. Such direction would have aided the Donners. It will reap benefits for you.

There is more to “hurrying along” than simply speeding up the system. We have to pace ourselves to get where we want to go. In the book of Joshua (24:15) we are told firmly, “Choose you this day whom ye will serve.” When we look to this scripture we usually hear “choose” and “serve.” But notice it says “this day,” not tomorrow or the next day or when you finish your finals. It says, now. Right now. The Lord has told us, “I come quickly,” and he is a man of his word. We must be prepared.

This is not idle counsel. We read in Helaman 13:38, “Behold, your days of probation are past; ye have procrastinated the day of your salvation until it is everlastingly too late.”

We cannot procrastinate our days of serving the Lord in his kingdom, or our daily reading of the scriptures until our class loads are lighter. Believe me, you are busy now; and it will never get better or easier. The load is always there, for the Lord is training you to lift and carry more and more. To sidestep such service is to miss opportunities in the kingdom that may not come again.

Lesson Five: Sometimes We Need to Be Rescued

Some of the members of the Donner party were saved only because of the timely rescue efforts of others, people who set aside their work and their personal safety to find those who were lost. Some of us in this room need rescuing—maybe some who aren’t here do too. And some of us are the rescuers. We aren’t being asked to strap on snow shoes and scale the west slope of the Sierras in the middle of winter; we are being asked to save souls, one person at a time. Remember, this is a spiritual journey, and this is the greatest work in the eyes of God.

I have a good friend who told me of a personal rescue that she holds close to her heart. She was a college student like you, but she attended that red-and-white institution to the north. (Some of you might think that was the source of her problems.) It was near the end of her senior year, and things were not falling together as she had hoped. She had applied to graduate school but wasn’t sure about taking that next step in her education. She was very involved in student affairs and recognized that these experiences that she loved were coming to an end. She was dating the missionary for whom she’d waited for two years, but she was also dating his best friend and had been for most of the time the missionary was gone. You get the picture. At that moment, her journey was a nightmare.

It was a Friday afternoon, and she was particularly downhearted. She hadn’t heard from any graduate schools. She was juggling dates for the weekend with both men. She had papers to write and projects to finish. Her little ten-year-old brother was the only one home, and he was begging her to play a game with him. She couldn’t stand to deal with life, so she left. She walked out the front door and up the street, and then she turned and began to walk toward the freeway. As she walked she heard a crunch on the gravel behind her, and turning

she saw her little brother. He looked at her face streaked with tears and then asked, “Where ya going?”

She replied in a voice most dramatic, “I don’t know.”

For a minute he looked at her, not sure what to do, and then he said, “Do you want to go to Skaggs?”

He was a rescuer that day. A little ten-year-old chasing a lost-looking sister around the corner and up the street. He knew something was wrong, didn’t know what, and yet he was the only one there. He made her laugh, and they went to Skaggs. She’ll never forget that day he saved her. He more than made her day.

How long has it been since you’ve made someone’s day? Or made a very bad day just a little bit better? Sometimes climbing up on that white horse feels good for the rider as well as the one in distress.

The Last Lesson: Journeys Are Packed with Troubles

The Donner party had big troubles that crippled their course. All of us have obstacles and difficulties in our lives. But let me contrast the difference in the approach of the Donner party with that of a band of Mormon pioneers crossing the Atlantic. William Clayton sailed from England to America in 1840 with a host of new converts. You know his name, for he later wrote the classic hymn “Come, Come Ye Saints.” The words are a testimony of his understanding of adversity as part of the eternal plan. After arriving in Nauvoo, Clayton wrote home to his fellow Saints in England and said:

We have sometimes almost suffocated with heat . . . sometimes almost froze with cold. We have had to sleep on boards instead of feathers, and on boxes which was worse. We have had our clothes wet through without the privilege of drying them or changing them. We have had to sleep out-of-doors in very severe weather. Don’t suppose for a moment that all will be peace and ease. . . . These are days of

tribulation and we must endure our portion. [And then he continued,] If you will be faithful you have nothing to fear from the journey. The Lord will take care of his saints. [William Clayton, letter from Commerce, 10 December 1840, Church Archives]

“Be faithful and you will have nothing to fear from the journey.” I testify to you today that this is true. Be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ and to the covenants you have made, and you will sing praises, “All is well.” I am not being simplistic when I say that our faith can carry us when we are weary, wounded, worn by the buffetings of the world, and wanting to go home. Faith can bring the journey of a lifetime. Look at Peter, who stepped off the boat to join Jesus. Peter stepped off because of his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He understood that with him all things are possible.

They are. I know this, and I promise you that such a testimony will come to you in your life as you exercise faith at the most trying of times.

The Lord loves you. Everyone of you is numbered, known, and loved by the Lord Jesus Christ. With such assurance, indeed, can’t we sing, “All is well”?

There are indeed reasons for our trials. Lorenzo Snow, fifth president of the Church, said, “You and I cannot be made perfect except through suffering: Jesus could not. In His prayer and agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, He foreshadowed the purifying process necessary . . . to secure the glory of a celestial kingdom” (10 January 1886, *JD* 26:367).

That concept of Gethsemane speaks to my heart. We all face those monumental periods in our lives when we turn to the Lord and pour out our souls, for the pain is too great to stand alone. Know that this, too, is part of the process of perfection. Let me share with you a poem that makes this point so well:

*All those who journey, soon or late,
Must pass within the garden's gate;
Must kneel alone in darkness there,
And battle with some fierce despair.
God pity those who cannot say,
"Not mine but thine," who only pray,
"Let this cup pass," and cannot see
The purpose in Gethsemane.*

[Ella Wheeler Wilcox, "Gethsemane," *Poetical Works of Ella Wheeler Wilcox* (Edinburgh: W. P. Nimmo, Hay, & Mitchell, 1917), pp. 133–34]

This life is a spiritual journey. There are lessons to be learned. Virginia said, "Never take no shortcuts," and she was wise. Shortcuts

only deflect us from the narrow trail. Travel light, be kind to everyone, hear with your heart when someone needs you. Hold your head high amid troubles and find comfort in the cry "All is well."

Time is short, my brothers and sisters, so "hurry along as fast as you can." We can do this for we are some of the Lord's most faithful Saints, and he is with us. He hears our prayers. He knows our needs. We have nothing to fear from the journey; we are on a well-marked path that leads home, all the way home to our Father in Heaven. Of this I testify, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.