

On Being Teachable

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On Being Learners

In the Book of Mormon we read: “And the church did meet together oft, to fast and to pray, and to speak one with another concerning the welfare of their souls” (Moroni 6:5).

This also seems like an important time to meet together often to fast and to pray and to speak one with another concerning the welfare of our souls. Some of us may experience too many meetings—are we not meeting and talking together all the time?

But there is in this scripture, and in others, a particular spirit of meeting one with another—a mutual caretaking, a spiritual reciprocity—even as the Apostle Paul entreated: a kindness, a desire to be tenderhearted one to another (Ephesians 4:32).

In preparing for today, I felt I should focus on what readies us to learn of the welfare of other souls. What readies us to be taught? And why, when we as a people are engaged in teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, should we also be concerned with being teachable?

Several years ago, a theme of the General Relief Society meeting was “Learn, Then Teach.” However, we sometimes only think about learning when we are in a classroom. We associate being teachable with being in

attendance. In a campus setting we can further link learning to a required curriculum, specified prerequisites, sequenced electives, and defined areas of study. We develop beliefs about who can and should be teaching us. So as students, when we finally get into the classes we want, it is fairly easy to adopt the attitude “Well, I’m here, the rest is up to you.”

As a teacher, I share with any of you who have faced a classroom the challenge of looking at faces, watching body postures, listening to questions, and trying to determine each person’s “readiness to learn.” I accept there is a responsibility and a requirement to be ready to teach; but today I want to focus on that powerful part of the interaction we influence as *learners*.

What are we like as learners? Over the years I’ve watched and had students describe to me (usually after the grades were in) their roles as learners.

Some would take the posture “Go ahead, get my attention if you can” or “I already

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know about this subject.” Some would say, “I don’t want to know about this subject—it’s required,” or “I need to know exactly what I’m supposed to learn here,” or “You’ve got my attention, but I don’t understand you.”

There are also those who come inquiring, ready to risk asking the “dumb question,” ready to contribute to the learning of others. My point is: Are we willing and able to look at what we are like as learners? Are we paying attention to how we ready ourselves to learn—our style, assumptions, expectations, attitudes, etc.? Are we aware how much we really influence, *if not control*, how teachable each of us really is?

Now, if the place of learning is not the traditional classroom, but a *congregation* or an interdenominational community, and the curriculum is not math or English, but the gospel of Jesus Christ—the character of our being one with another heretofore, here and hereafter—then what would describe us as learners? Who may instruct us?

What does it mean to be teachable? This is a difficult concept for me to explain. I have experienced it in myself and in others with more certainty than I can articulate a description. Because of our individuality, the expression varies. The common characteristics seem to be (although listed separately, these form a tangible whole) a sense of one’s incompleteness—a gnawing awareness of a desired, divine and future state; a contrite spirit; a humble heart; a knowledge of one’s worth; a reverence for the worth of others; the trusting readiness often most apparent in little children; a belief in one’s abilities and one’s capacity to grow and to contribute; and an acknowledgement of our interdependency as sons and daughters of our heavenly parents.

Perhaps, fundamentally, being teachable means that we *daily* open ourselves to the *consistency* of God’s love for us. We accept we *are* loved and make real in our complex, earthly

lives the cornerstone commandments to love our God and our neighbors as ourselves.

We can acknowledge that no matter who we are or where we are, encoded into each of us are two things: (1) this common language of learning that is love, and (2) a most common bond of purpose: we came to learn and to “speak one with another concerning the welfare of our souls”—in fact, to progress eternally.

Our capacity to be taught is infinite—whatever our current circumstances, whatever the conditions of our physical abilities, and whatever status we may hold in the eyes of others. It is often easy to move away from such a compelling awareness of our potential. We can both allow and assist others in getting in the way of our being teachable. We can find for a variety of reasons—fear, doubt, convenience, comfort—ways to deny our capacity for learning, to lose faith in ourselves, to lose faith in the love of those around us, or to lose faith in God’s love for us. By not believing in our capacity to learn (even from our mistakes), by not believing in our capacity to influence others for good, we attempt to deny the power of God in us.

I hope I have conveyed to you my belief in our capacity and responsibility to remain ever the learning children of our Heavenly Father and my belief as well that this condition of being teachable is fundamentally linked to God’s love for us and ours for him and for one another. Now I would like to suggest five things that can have an impact on this quality of being teachable and comment on three areas where we can currently edify each other as we speak one with another.

To Improve our Teachableness

First, let us *demonstrate what we say we already know* so that our preparation to learn even more is evident to our earthly parents, to our Heavenly Father, and to others around us in the congregation.

Why are we constantly reminded of things? Why are the basic principles repeated so frequently? Perhaps we have not demonstrated in our daily behavior our ability to do those things. Long ago, King Benjamin advised his congregation “If you believe all these things see that ye do them” (Mosiah 4:10).

If we are demonstrating what we have learned, even a reminder will be heard without offense. When I was sixteen I backed out of our steep driveway directly into the only car parked on the other side of the street. I think that over the decades I’ve now proven I can navigate my parents’ driveway, and because of that their reminders are not heard the same way they were the first few times after the accident when I had not yet “proved myself.”

Sometimes we treat requests to visit teach, home teach, prepare for meetings, or even to be compassionate as things we *could do* if we really had time or if we really wanted to do them. I have experienced the deception that can come when we confuse *thinking about the possible actions* with the actual effort required to *do them*. I don’t learn as much from thinking about opportunities to be charitable as I do from exercising charity in my conduct with others and learning from those vary real experiences.

What if, as a ward or stake congregation, when we next met together, we had all paid our tithes, made clear our love for our neighbors in how we treated them and spoken with each other, had proven obedient to the commandments, and in diverse ways of expression given evidence of the fullness of our faith? What would the speakers say to us? By our efforts wouldn’t we have demonstrated a readiness to learn that would call forth even greater instructions?

In discussing the glory of the city of Enoch, Neal Maxwell presented a narrative progressively illustrating the readiness of a people and included these observations:

Our unity is not the unity born of compulsion or of mindless rapport, but of the realization that such unity is a necessity. . . .

It helps greatly to do first things first, not only because these are most important, but because the order of things does matter. . . .

*. . . In our meetings we recount our own blessings, and as we hear the blessings of others, we both feel and see the accumulations of affection from God to his people. [Neal A. Maxwell, *Of One Heart* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1975), pp. 44–45]*

As Alma said, “By small and simply things are great things brought to pass” (Alma 37:6). Let us demonstrate our ability to do even “small and simple things.”

Second, we learn about being teachable when we *seek to balance being directed and being anxiously engaged*. There are absolutes in life—things we are not supposed to do. But there is also ambiguity—several possible ways to do good, to influence others, and multiple avenues to excel. In the face of ambiguity, some of us will be directed and will know for certain what to do; for others of us, it will be up to *us* to figure out what to do!

Sometimes what I personally should be learning is painfully obvious to myself and to others. Sometimes I have struggled for years to understand, to discern the meaning of an experience, or to embrace a principle.

Being receptive and being active are both ways to enhance our teachableness. There is probably a little bit of both Julia Child and MacGyver in each of us. Some of us want the recipe; we want the ingredients explicitly identified and their relationship clarified. On the other hand, some of us just want the basic principles and will make do with whatever “materials” or conditions are around us. (Ask anyone who watched ABC’s MacGyver what a MacGyverism is.) Our differences in how we approach learning should invite *interest* from each other and not judgment.

If we err in the extreme—either in thinking “if we are not told, we don’t have to try” or “I resent being told, I can figure it out myself”—we diminish our ability to be taught.

Third, we can *seek to increase our capacity to discern*. Our lives are complex, our circumstances varied. Failure to develop our spiritual capacity to discern could leave us overwhelmed, overdependent on others for meaning, overcommitted, or overreacting to the next thing that pops up. We are here to make choices. This was made evident to me quite powerfully in a priesthood blessing in which I was told in essence, “You will *know* what is good to do if you do not reason it away.” I have often remembered that instruction and thought about the criteria it suggests for discerning what is good to do in my life.

I believe we develop discernment by exercising it. We can combine our efforts with the guidance of the Spirit. We can compare our experiences with those of others without feeling we are competing. We can rejoice in *their* excellence and still know there are ways we can also excel.

We can monitor our own progress and discern the gains we make and the patterns in which we are vulnerable to temptation. I am indebted to a wise old friend (both in years and association) of another faith who taught me to take an active *interest* in learning about the patterns in my life and how temptations occurred. He struggled a long time with some of his temptations and finally decided to take a pro-active interest. He would try to anticipate where in his life he might encounter that “ole trickster devil” again. He became a good scout. He watched the terrain of his life and could tell where it looked like his own form of quicksand might be. He rerouted and gave up trying to see how close he could get to that quicksand without getting caught.

Fourth, *we are teachable when we can trust in the Lord*. Sometimes we won’t know in advance; sometimes in our lives we will

“wait upon the Lord” for a long time. But we still need to ready ourselves. We need to be learning even though the specific opportunities to express what we are learning may not be as apparent or as exciting as we wish.

I gained an appreciation of this point a few weeks ago when I accompanied my sister to St. George. Her three children sing in the Utah Valley Children’s Choir, and she wanted to hear their concert. I wanted to sleep or read; she convinced me I could do both in the car while she drove.

The kids had worked hard, paying attention to Beverly Thomas’ direction, learning lyrics, rehearsing harmony, and trying to show up at performances in the appropriate outfits. They did a good job. After their last concert the kids had a chance to stop in Zion National Park on the way home. Diane and I pulled up alongside the bus as it unloaded sixty noisy kids who raced up the path to Weeping Rock. We decided it would be safer to wait in the parking lot.

All of a sudden it was strangely quiet in the canyon. We couldn’t see the kids. And then truly angelic sounds filled the canyon. People in the parking lot who were not with our group stopped. We all heard words echoing in the canyon: “We will sing for the Lord is listening. He hears the praise of our hearts. We will sing for the Lord is listening. We lift our voices and start to sing for the Lord” (“Sing for the Lord Is Listening,” Steven Kapp Perry, 1986). It was a beautiful moment of clarity and harmony.

When the song ended there was a joyous shout followed by the more familiar chaotic noises of kids racing back to the bus. When they got back their excitement and joy was tangible. “Did you hear us?” They relayed the story of an older couple who were nearby as they started. When they offered to sing for them, the couple smiled and started to back away, only to stand transfixed as the kids began singing.

Now when they started choir, nobody promised them a perfect moment in Zion Park on April 29, but there it was. If they had not been ready—individually prepared and collectively willing to participate—they could not have had that experience. It is one thing to arrive at a place like Zion’s Weeping Rock and realize, “Yes, this could be a great place for a group of kids to spontaneously experience the product of their learning and the Lord’s love through music,” and quite another to feel, “Oh, *here* is the place you have prepared, and having been taught, I am ready.”

Earlier, in describing the qualities that contribute to being teachable, I listed self-worth. How we understand self-worth greatly impacts the degree to which we are teachable. So my fifth point is that *self-worth is different from self-importance*. God loves us and we are of value to him. If I am teachable I can learn from those who acknowledge their worth without becoming vain, I can assess their strength and talents without becoming boastful, and, when surrounded by the blessings of a loving God, I can remember Alma’s caution to his son:

Do not say: O God, I thank thee that we are better than our brethren; but rather say: O Lord, forgive my unworthiness, and remember my brethren in mercy. [Alma 38:14]

If we do not *care* much for ourselves, then to love our neighbor as ourself doesn’t mean much. Loving ourselves can magnify our charity towards others. If we overvalue or undervalue ourselves, we are less able and ready to learn from others. We either think we can’t learn much from them, or we don’t trust their motive for interacting with us.

Helping someone to love himself or herself is harder than just telling that person that you love them. We each have a gift. We can learn how to remind each other of the value of our part and the contribution we can make to the whole.

Strengthening Our Interactions

Now, having sought to be more teachable and able to embrace the qualities and to comprehend the challenges, I want to suggest three aspects of our interaction where being teachable seems to be a very needed goal.

First, that we might *better know the experience of being a woman or a man in our congregation*. What is it like for someone who is different from us? If we are women, what can we know of the experiences of men as fathers, husbands, siblings, and brothers in the gospel? If we are men, what can we know of the experiences of women?

If we too quickly assume we know what the experience of someone else is or should be, then we are less prepared to learn from “speaking together concerning the welfare of our souls.” I can imagine that Elder Maxwell’s description of the quality of conversation in the city of Enoch is instructive to us as both men and women:

You should observe . . . how . . . they listen to each other instead of seeking to display their own learning. They are more willing to be impressed than they are eager to impress. [Maxwell, p. 15]

I think that description is important no matter if we are “eager to impress” others of our “conservative” or “liberal” values. We have much to learn from one another in living the gospel, and we can best do that by staying in relationship to each other. I know in my own life it is easier to talk *about* somebody than *with* them—but my learning is different when we are speaking together. I have learned to listen without fearing that others will think my listening means agreement. And I have learned that being too anxious to tell others where our differences exist hasn’t helped me understand them.

I welcome the opportunities to share the similarities and differences of our experience as sisters in living the gospel. I am interested in

how men around us support our sisterhood and our learning. I want to know how they experience women supporting their friendships as men as well as sustaining the priesthood they hold.

A second area where being teachable can strengthen our interaction has to do with the quality of our service to one another in our congregation and communities. Having heard that where much is given much is expected, I have sometimes allowed my own *need to be serving* to determine what I did rather than paying close attention to the *needs of others*. Seeking to meet the needs of others is more of a challenge than doing what is convenient for me to be “helpful.”

Paying attention to others is a powerful factor in how well we serve. Tim Gallwey wrote about the necessity of paying attention to service. Interestingly enough, he was talking about tennis. He was suggesting that to improve our serve we had to learn to love the tennis ball. “What!” I remembered saying. “Love a tennis ball?” But he meant pay attention to it, see how it bounces, see where the seams are when it comes at you—concentrate. When we love, we concentrate our attention.

By truly paying attention to others around me and concentrating on them, I can place myself in their service and am taught what is

needed. I saw a very pragmatic example of this a few semesters ago when a study group member who obviously had better computer skills than the others didn’t take the attitude “I learned it, so can they,” and didn’t say, “I’ll do it since you’ll never learn this anyway.” Instead, he watched, he made himself available, he answered questions, he encouraged. He didn’t exaggerate. In his daily interactions with his study group he was taught how he could best teach them, and he did.

Now, last of all, the best expression of our willingness to be teachable is to be ever ready to say at any moment in our lives, “Nevertheless, not my will, but thine.” Elder Maxwell states, “The Lord loves both the teachable and the unteachable, but it is through the obedience of the teachable that God can help these helpers, that all might be benefited thereby” (Maxwell, p. 48).

For each of us and for myself, I pray that we will realize that our obedience; our agency; our acknowledgment of God’s love for us and our love for him, for our neighbor, and for ourselves; our testimony of the truthfulness of his gospel; and our willingness to trust his further instruction are never more evident than when we can echo in a small way in our lives the words of our elder brother: “Here am I, send me.” I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.