

Pointed in the Right Direction

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About three months ago, Rex and I attended a commencement exercise for our oldest son Tom, who was graduating from law school. On graduation day, as I strained to get a glimpse of Tom in the sea of caps and gowns, my eyes searched for his face, but my heart and mind were traveling through time to years gone by. My momentary vision was blurred by a flood of memories mixed with tears. Let me share just one of those memories with you.

I remembered a little boy of three who was trying to write his name. I had written *T-O-M* out for him on a piece of paper and then left him to practice while I bathed the baby. A little later he proudly showed me his finished product. *MOT*, it clearly read. Because of my experience as a school teacher, I was aware that young children often read and write in reverse, a condition that sometimes continues into adulthood. Fortunately, it turned out that Tom's problem was easily solved, but at that moment my mind was full of possibilities and solutions.

I suggested that he write the *T* first. He came back again a few minutes later with the same result: *M-O-T*.

I put my hand on his to guide him, explaining that we would begin with the *T* first, but

he pulled away from me insisting, "I always start with the *T*, and you always say it's wrong. I just can't do it." And with that, he tore the paper into little pieces and threw them away. He was in no mood for a writing lesson, so we went for a walk. Later that night, when he felt like trying again, we got out a new sheet of paper. He wrote his name in big letters (this time for his dad). I watched him from across the room, and he was right. He did start with the *T*. His problem was that he then moved to the left with the next two letters instead of to the right!

Before I had a chance to explain that our child's self-esteem was at stake, his dad teased, "Oh, I didn't know we had a little boy named Mot." Well, at that point, the evening was all over for Tom. No amount of praise for the well-formed letters or suggestions that we would help him do it right consoled him. Right there, at age three, Tom believed he was a failure. As I sat by his bed and soothed him to sleep, I knew better. I saw potential in him that he could not see in himself. I knew, though he

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did not, that he would learn to write his name, but that was not the important point. Even if he never learned to write his name, he would not be a failure in my eyes.

As I watched his little body relax into sleep and reflected on the day's events, I felt very much the protective parent, and I wondered how often our Heavenly Father sees us in just the same way. Hasn't he told us, "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you. . . . And when ye see this, your heart shall rejoice" (Isaiah 66:13–14). How many times when we see ourselves as failures does Heavenly Father wish he could pick us up from despair, hold us in his arms, and tell us that we are not failures and that if we will have faith, he will help us overcome our trials.

Certainly it would have been easier for me to have written Tom's name correctly every time he wanted it on something, but I knew that the only way he would learn would be for him to do it himself. My job was to show him how, to point him in the right direction. In the same way, our Heavenly Father wants us to grow through our own experiences. This means he probably won't solve our calculus problems for us, pay our tuition, write our English papers, study our chemistry, or turn our roommates into perfect people. But he will help us and give us direction. As *we* do the work, our Father in Heaven will help lift our burdens. You might think of it as a joint effort. Remember the Lord's promise to us: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Eventually, Tom was writing his name everywhere (yes, all three letters in the correct order). We found *Tom* written in chalk on the sidewalk in front of our house, on a piece of paper taped to his bedroom door, in crayon on the kitchen countertop, and written in the dust over and over on our unwashed car. With that last accomplishment he proudly took me outside to show off what he had done. The look of triumph in his eyes made me certain that no amount of three-year-old spit and dust could possibly harm the

finish on our car. I gave him a hug and didn't even suggest that we would need to wash the car soon.

You, too, are on the brink of new and challenging experiences this year, full of wonderful opportunities. Take advantage of them. Work hard to grow and learn. And when you are frustrated and feel like a failure—or want to tear your life into little pieces—just remember our son Mot. At that frustrating moment look for someone who can help you. It might be a parent, a friend, a roommate, a professor, a bishop. Most important, never forget to get on your knees and ask your Heavenly Father to point you in the right direction. In the most loving way he can, the Lord has told us, "Fear not, little flock [for I am with thee]. Look unto me in every thought; doubt not, fear not" (D&C 6:34, 36).

Our Father in Heaven knows our fears. But he has not left us alone without direction. He has sent his Only Begotten Son to this earth to give us an example of a perfect life—the ultimate visual aid! He has also given us ancient and modern-day scriptures that we can read and reread to keep us on the right path, along with a prophet and apostles to point the way. We have been given all that we need to see clearly which direction we should go, and even if we falter or fall, he is there to lift us up. If we lose our way, he has provided a way back. And when we need direction and reassurance (which we do every day), we can communicate through prayer. Use this source, and never doubt its power. Sometimes when you are discouraged (and we all are from time to time), he may be your only source. He is the right source for a good beginning, and good beginnings can lead to great successes. Our Father in Heaven sees our potential—just as I saw Tom's—and wants us to succeed. He will do everything that he can to see that we do. We need only to do our part.

Whether it is your first semester or your last, we're glad you're here and pray for your success and happiness, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.