

Knowing When to Persevere and When to Change Direction

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When my daughter Stephanie was five years old, I took her to register for kindergarten. When we arrived, she was invited to go into a classroom to “play games” with the teachers and other children. As a former elementary school teacher, I was certain the “games” were a method of testing for placement purposes.

A teacher was sitting just outside the room with a box of crayons and several sheets of blank paper, and I smiled confidently to myself from across the hall as Stephanie was asked to choose her favorite color and write her name. “She could write *all* the names in our family,” I thought to myself. “She is so well prepared, there isn’t anything in that room she can’t handle!” But Stephanie just stood there. The teacher repeated the instructions, and again my daughter stood still, staring blankly at the box of crayons with her knees locked and hands behind her back.

In the sweet, patient voice that teachers use when they are beginning to feel slightly *impatient*, the teacher asked once more, “Stephanie, choose your favorite color, dear, and write your name on this piece of paper.” I was about to come to my daughter’s aid when the teacher kindly said, “That’s okay. We will help you

learn to write your name when you come to school in the fall.” With all the restraint I could muster, I watched Stephanie move into the classroom with a teacher who believed my daughter did not know how to write her name.

On the way home I tried to ask as nonchalantly as possible why she had not written her name. “I couldn’t,” she replied. “The teacher said to choose my favorite color, and there wasn’t a pink crayon in the box!”

I reflect on this incident often as I watch my children grow and observe life in general. How many times are we, as Heavenly Father’s children, immobilized because the choice we had in mind for ourselves just isn’t available to us, at least not at the time we want it?

Is progress halted when acceptance into a chosen major is denied, when enrollment in a required class is closed, when a desired job doesn’t come through, when that dream date doesn’t progress beyond friendship, or when the money hoped for isn’t there? Are we ever, for reasons that are hard to understand or beyond our control, faced with a set of

Janet G. Lee, wife of Rex E. Lee, gave this devotional address at Brigham Young University on 14 January 1992.

circumstances that we did not have in mind for ourselves? In other words, what happens when we look in the box and the pink crayon just isn't there? It is so easy to lock our knees, put our hands behind our back, and do nothing when things wished for and dreamed about are beyond our reach. But to do so would defy the very reason we are placed here on this earth. As hard as it sometimes is to understand, stumbling blocks are essential to our progression.

Remember what the Lord said: "If thou art called to pass through [some] tribulation . . . know . . . that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good" (D&C 122:5–7).

I have often wondered how Joseph of old must have felt as his brothers sold him into Egypt. Did he think that the good life was all over for him, that he would never again experience joy? What about Abraham and Isaac? Did they wonder why that horrible, sacrificial commandment had fallen to them? How did Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah feel as they bore the stigma of being barren, when in those days it was interpreted as a sign of God's displeasure? How did Lehi and Sariah feel as they fled from their home and friends in Jerusalem to live in the wilderness? And in this dispensation, would Hyrum and Joseph ever have chosen the difficulties they faced?

In each of these cases, as we observe the lives of men and women in scripture, it is easy to see how people can triumph over adversity. But in our own everyday lives it is often difficult to see beyond our own frustrations, to remain focused, to see the end from the beginning.

Elder Richard G. Scott wisely instructed in the October 1991 general conference:

Trust [the Lord], even when in eternal perspective it temporarily hurts very much. Have patience when you are asked to wait when you want immediate action. . . . The path you are to walk through life

may be very different from others. You may not always know why He does what He does, but you can know that He is perfectly just and perfectly merciful. ["Obtaining Help from the Lord," Ensign, November 1991, p. 86; emphasis added]

When my son Tom was twelve, his dream was to be a professional basketball player. Even though he practiced into the night, he was worried that he wasn't the best on his team and even more worried that he was too short. I remember one night when he asked me, "What will happen to me if I don't reach my goal?" We talked for a long time about choices and individual differences, about challenges and how to know when to persevere and when to change direction.

Tom made the high school team, but when it became apparent that there were other things he could do better, he changed direction. The crayon he would have chosen as a teenager just wasn't there for him. He had to color his life with other choices. At twelve he thought his life would be worthless if he couldn't play pro ball. At twenty-seven he feels successful in what he is doing and is happy in his profession.

Life is like that, and what we might want at twelve or twenty or forty-two or even seventy-two might have to be adapted to the opportunities and options that are available to us at the time.

A few years ago my sister and I were walking along the beach when we began a very serious talk about life, its challenges, and our growing ability to handle whatever came to us. "I think I have lived long enough now that I could handle any challenge given me," I naively stated.

"I think I could, too," was my sister's quick reply.

Then the question that I will remember forever came from her: "Janet, what would be your most difficult challenge?"

I didn't even need to think. I already knew. "The hardest thing for me," I began, "would be the death of my husband. I can't imagine life without Rex."

"That would be hard," she answered, "but I think divorce would be even more difficult for me."

The preposterousness of our fears was interesting. Rex was running marathons and the picture of health. My sister's marriage seemed very much intact, and so, of course, we laughed at suggestions that couldn't possibly become realities.

Just eight months later Rex lay near death in a hospital and my sister's divorce proceedings had begun. Remembering that day and the year that followed will always bring back bittersweet memories for me. My sister and I most certainly would not have chosen those colors from our box of choices, but we had to pull our lives together from the colors that were there. Today she is happy in a new marriage to a wonderful man, and my life with Rex is rich and full. My choice would not have been to experience what was given me to do, yet, as a result, each day is filled with deeper meaning, greater understanding, and new insights. If I could trade it all back now and take the challenges away, I would do so in a minute. I don't like the fact that my husband has cancer. It is definitely a deviation from the life I had in

mind for us. But if I *could* turn back the clock, would I also have to trade in what I have learned? I wouldn't want to give that part back. Always having our first choice might mean giving up unknown benefits. As Emerson said, "For everything you have missed, you have gained something else" (*Essays: First Series* [1841], "Compensation").

Let me share with you part of a letter someone wrote after hearing the story of Stephanie and her crayons.

I don't have all the colors of crayons that I want—but I do have all the colors that I need. When I need new or different colors in my life, Heavenly Father will make sure that I have them. I know that he will never give me a challenge beyond my reach or beyond the tools he has given me to work with. I also know that the challenges and trials I have are in reality blessings, and I will be better and stronger for having gone through them.

I bear my testimony that God lives, that he hears and answers our prayers, that he will help us through life's challenges because he loves us and wants us to return to him. It is my prayer that we will color our lives in a beautiful way with whatever colors are available to us, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.