

# Overcoming Discouragement

REX E. AND JANET G. LEE

**R**ex: Welcome. For some of you it's welcome back, and for others it's welcome for the first time. But for all it's welcome to BYU.

You're going to learn a lot here, including things you had not thought you would be learning. For example, I have found that BYU improves your eyesight: You can sit on the very top row of this building, or for that matter at the top of Cougar Stadium, and spot a foul that a referee standing five feet away from the action cannot see.

**Janet:** It always amazes us as we look out over this large group in the Marriott Center at the beginning of each semester to see how happy and well adjusted all of you appear to be. But we know that behind each glowing countenance there are countless stories of required classes that were too full, rearranged schedules, overdrawn or nonexistent bank accounts, homework overload, feelings of inadequacy, and people you would like to date who have not yet had the good sense to see what a perfect match you would be. How do we know these things? Because we've been there before, and we have three children who are here on campus this semester.

**Rex:** It is because we understand much of what you're going through that we want to

talk with you today about discouragement. We are not talking about clinical depression, or anything approaching it. That is a completely different subject, and one which we are not qualified to discuss. We are talking about garden variety discouragement that we all feel and that, if not dealt with properly, can seriously impede our learning and our happiness.

**Janet:** Discouragement doesn't have to mean defeat, and there are ways to deal with it. It can and does happen at any age, but the more times we can work through it, the more strength we have to fight it off when it happens again. Discouragement can't be entirely avoided; it creeps up on us in a thousand little insidious ways. Often our defenses are already down. We are tired or weakened by other experiences that have robbed us of our confidence. Perhaps we have let things slide and have gotten behind in our work, or exchanged harsh words with someone. Then boom! The inevitable happens.

**Rex:** So, if it's inevitable, what do we do about it? Any challenge as important and as

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*Rex E. Lee was president of Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 13 September 1994.*

complex as discouragement does not lend itself neatly to a simple checklist approach, and the ideas we plan to discuss with you today are certainly not exhaustive. But let us give you three ideas that we have developed and that have been helpful to us over the years. Coincidentally, the key words for all three happen to begin with the letter *p*.

The first key word is *perspective*. We need to see discouragement for what it really is. Don't blow it out of proportion. And try not to worry about the things that may never happen. As Mark Twain said, "I'm an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened."

**Janet:** On my first night at BYU, I fell asleep in a daze of excitement for what was ahead, nostalgia for things left behind, and apprehension about the new chapter in my life. It is always hard to close the door on a segment of our lives until we find a window and catch a glimpse of the future.

During those first few weeks, I didn't just love my classes, the mountains seemed to be closing in on me, I wondered where all the cute boys were, I missed the familiar food from home, my bed didn't feel right, I had a hard time deciding how much time to devote to each class, there were ten thousand people in my biology section (imagine what I would have thought today), and my roommates didn't like to go to sleep to my music.

I remember few times in my life when I was so discouraged. I used to walk from my dorm to the Eyring Science Center for my first class each morning almost on the verge of tears, thinking of how lonely and how far from home I was. "Was the fun part of my life over?" I used to wonder.

So many times now when I drive across campus I go past Heritage Halls, where I used to live. I think about the "me" of long ago, and I think about each one of you. Sometimes I drive slowly and try to see your faces. Occasionally, when I think I see a forlorn face,

the motherly instinct in me wants to jump out and give you a hug and tell you it will be all right. I wouldn't lie to you and tell you that life doesn't have its disappointments. I would just talk with you about this all-important principle of perspective, and I would tell you what I wish I had known that first year: that life doesn't have to be perfect to be perfectly wonderful.

**Rex:** Student discouragement is not limited to entering freshmen, or even to undergraduates. By far my worst experience with discouragement occurred during my first year of law school. It was caused by my losing perspective.

Day after day I would put in long hours of preparation and then sit in class and be amazed that seemingly everyone of my classmates could come up with all kinds of brilliant insights while all I could do was sit there and say to myself, "Gee, I wish I'd thought of that." I honestly wondered during those first few months if I was destined to flunk out. I have since discovered that this is a common phenomenon, and it is not limited to law students. From conversations with some of you, I've learned that many face the same challenge: today's BYU students are very well prepared, and some often sit in class thinking that everyone else is getting it better than they are. My own experience taught me that another important antidote for discouragement is to never give up on yourself. Remember the fundamental principle that for any really top quality school—and BYU clearly qualifies—if you're good enough to get in, you're good enough to get out.

**Janet:** Keeping things in perspective as it relates to dealing with discouragement affected our own relationship early on and in a very important way. When Rex and I were dating at BYU, he surprised me one night by indicating that he felt our relationship was getting serious. But I had just begun to come to terms with my own feelings, and he was way ahead of me. All of my logic told me Rex had everything I could ever want in a husband, yet I

needed that bolt of lightning to strike me and say, "This is the one!" Well, it came in a very unexpected way. For one entire week my concern was that he was getting too serious. Then one evening he suggested that we should date other people again. I was stunned, but I agreed and said good night. I was not prepared for the emotion I was about to feel. As the door closed behind me, the fear of losing him was more than I could bear. I stood frozen in the dark, leaning against the door for support. The world seemed to have stopped, and I wasn't sure that I wanted it to start again without Rex there with me. I cried as though my heart would break. How clearly now I could see the priceless gem that was almost mine, but it seemed to be slipping away from my grasp. What other girl did he have in mind when he mentioned dating "others"?

**Rex:** The answer is simple: I really didn't have anybody in mind.

**Janet:** Yeah, right. I think he's lying.

**Rex:** That's nonsense and she knows it. She can't give you the name of anyone else because there was no one else. Actually, I was sure she was the one, and quite frankly I can't explain why I suggested maybe we ought to date some other people for a while. It was probably just an irrational stalling technique.

During the intervening week I felt pretty good about the new "date other people" arrangement until she actually did what I suggested we do. That next Friday night, after having been away for a few days, I came back to town looking forward to seeing Janet. I was stunned to learn that she was actually on a date with someone else. Apparently she had recovered from a broken heart and a world that had come to an end with amazing speed. At first I felt betrayed, then angry, and then within five minutes I realized I had brought the circumstance on myself and began to worry. When her roommates told me who her date was, my worry turned to panic. I knew the guy. How would she dare go out

with someone like him? He was better looking than I, had a lot more money, and a lot better car. In terms of intelligence and righteousness, we were about dead even. But he definitely had a more engaging personality. The bottom line: On a ten-point scale, he beat me by three points. Was I now to lose out on the best deal that ever came into my life? So desperately I wanted to turn the clock back seven days, because I could see much more clearly than I had one week earlier how lucky I was to have what I had previously taken for granted.

I came back the next night. She wouldn't come out of her room. The reason, she said, was that she had washed her hair and was blowing it dry. I never could figure that one out. In the first place, I wanted to see her—whether her hair was wet or dry didn't matter two cents worth. Moreover, I'd washed my hair before. Drying time? A minute thirty seconds max.

**Janet:** Yes, but don't you remember that during those days you had a crew cut? You could dry your hair with a towel.

**Rex:** All right, so you had more hair. But not even Samson and Rapunzel back-to-back should have taken the whole evening. Anyway, I did what any red-blooded American boy would do. I stood outside her dorm and threw rocks at her window. But all was not lost. By the next night she was ready to talk and for some reason was willing to overlook my three-point deficit.

**Janet:** Through that experience Rex and I came to the realization that we had brought about our own discouragement because we had lost perspective by not appreciating what we already had.

**Rex:** Our second suggestion for dealing with discouragement is *people involvement*. Let me tell you of a recent simple example that brought home to me how other people can help us cope with discouragement. In the BYU barbershop there is a framed picture that bears the caption *F-117*. I was told it was

three-dimensional. For six months, in two-week intervals, I would look at that thing and could not see in it a picture of an airplane or anything other than a bunch of squiggly colored lines, and there was nothing three-dimensional about it. As the number of times that I looked at it without being able to see an F-117 increased, so did my frustration. Then one day, my barber, Gary Dayton, told me to stand back about ten feet and look at my reflected tie in the glass that covered the picture. It worked. The 3-D picture of the stealth bomber came into my view, and my frustration vanished. Now every time I go to get my hair cut, I stand in front of that picture with a sense of grand accomplishment, and within two or three seconds the airplane appears. And I owe it all to a friend who was willing to help me see what had already become obvious to him. He is also a fairly decent barber.

**Janet:** We don't have to go through discouragement alone—nor should we even try. There are others who can help, who want to help. By the same token, there are others whom *we* can help.

When our neighbor, Jimmy, was four, he was not happy in preschool. No one could determine why. The school offered him the best toys and paints and smiling teachers. But still Jimmy cried every day. So Jimmy's mother and the director decided it would be best for him to withdraw. After a few weeks, Jimmy decided he wanted to go to a different preschool. His mother was skeptical but enrolled him in the new school. When she left him the first day, she was careful to leave a phone number, feeling certain she would receive a call. But it never came—not that day or all that week. He was happy every day and when asked what he did there, his usual reply was, "I help Bobby."

Then one day when Jimmy's mother suggested taking him out of school for the day, he burst out crying, "I can't be gone. I have to be there. Bobby needs me." It was then that she

learned the source of her son's new found happiness in school. He was helping a boy with impaired muscular coordination, and both boys benefited from the relationship. Shiny red trucks, swings, or finger paints could not make Jimmy's day happy at preschool. Amidst those toys he could only think of how miserable he was and how much he missed home. But giving service to someone in need directed his interests away from his problems, gave him purpose, and made him happy.

**Rex:** Anyone who has learned to serve has discovered the positive effects such effort has on our own sense of well-being. Often our own discouragement can be forgotten when we are helping someone else. It is easy to understand why when we remember King Benjamin's words: "When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God" (Mosiah 2:17).

**Janet:** After my first year here I wasn't certain I wanted to return, but within days after I arrived for my second year, I was very happy. I owe at least my initial good adjustment to some very thoughtful roommates. They were great at making other people, including me, feel good about themselves. They had learned the art of honestly looking for people's best qualities and knew how to point them out sincerely and at just the right moment, without any ulterior motive. It is often difficult for us to see what we do well without the perspective of another view. Yet we see our faults so easily. Wouldn't it be great if our days could be filled more with looking for the good in others and drawing their attention to it rather than in looking for things to criticize? Thank you Emma Jean, Kay, and Margaret for that wonderful blessing. I will always remember you and what you did for me.

**Rex:** Among the more obvious people to whom we can turn for help are our Heavenly Father—through scripture study and prayer—families, roommates, friends, bishop or other church leaders. And we faculty members also

want to help. I will never forget the impression made on me by a particular professor when I was a student here. We used to register by standing in long lines in the Fieldhouse to enroll for each class. At the end of each line, the teacher for that particular class handed out an IBM card, if there were any left. If there weren't any left, you got in another long line. Believe me, whatever its minor disadvantages, telephone registration is a great improvement.

On my first registration day, when I finally reached the front of the line for a political science class, I found a thoroughly congenial faculty member who, to my amazement, called me by name. I had never seen him before. He knew that I was a prelaw student and said how much he was looking forward to having me in his class and giving me any help that I needed in preparing for law school. To this day I have no idea how he knew who I was or what my interests were, but that was the beginning of a relationship with Stewart Grow that would last all of his life. He not only guided me during my BYU days, but also through law school and my professional career. His advice was helpful, but even more helpful was the sure knowledge that there was always someone there who cared about me. Stewart Grow is no longer with us, but there are other faculty members just as conscientious. Take advantage of their willingness to help. In fact, the reason for the new mentoring program is that we want to help create more relationships like the one I enjoyed with Professor Grow. One of BYU's goals is to be "user friendly."

**Janet:** We often don't realize the positive influence we can have on others, or how even simple acts of kindness can cheer another's day. Let me tell you of an incident that happened in our home several years ago. To set the stage, it had been a long, hard day. The keys were locked in the car, the washer overflowed, the baby had colic, the dog had thrown up on the carpet, our two-year-old had flushed her shoe down the toilet, and Rex called to say

he would be late for dinner. Finding the only safe sanctuary a frazzled mother has, I closed the bathroom door behind me to cry for a minute. I thought it was a silent cry, but in no time at all a piece of red construction paper came sliding under the door. I picked it up and there, in bright blue marker, was a smiley face drawn by a perceptive eight-year-old. I couldn't help but smile, dry my tears, and reenter my wonderful, yet sometimes hectic world. How often a small gesture of hope, encouragement, and humor can cheer a day of discouragement.

**Rex:** Now to our third *p*. The final antidote for discouragement subsumes all the rest. Any discussion about overcoming discouragement would be totally lacking without talking about it. It is prayer. I echo Abraham Lincoln's words: "Without the assistance of the Divine Being I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail."

My own first experience with prayer on this campus occurred the very first day I arrived—or better said, the first night. Because four of us made the trip from St. Johns in a 1943 Chevrolet whose top speed was fifty miles per hour, we didn't arrive until late at night. The housing office for our dorm was closed, and so we slept that night without the benefit of mattresses, sheets, blankets, or pillows. And for some reason the electricity had not been turned on, so the place was almost pitch dark. But those slight inconveniences were not the heart of the discouragement that I felt. My world seemed to be closing in around me, and my outlook was as dark as the room I occupied. Here I was, 600 miles away from home for the first time, about to become a member of a freshman class three-and-a-half times the size of the total population of my town, and full of misgivings whether a boy from St. Johns could make it at a big university. Instinctively, I got down on my knees, put my elbows on the wire mesh that served as the springs for my unmattressed bed, and began



some of the most earnest pleading with my Heavenly Father that I have ever undertaken. It helped. I knew that I was not alone, that I had a partner who was interested in me and willing to help. Though my earthly parents were located hundreds of miles to the south, my Heavenly Father was very much there with me. As I look back on it now, I'm reminded of President Thomas S. Monson's counsel that "prayer is the passport to spiritual power." In this case, my misgivings did not completely disappear, but the stifling discouragement gave way to a healthy anxiety. Used properly, this prayer passport is our most powerful possession, yet it is not an Aladdin's lamp to grant us our every desire. Our Father in Heaven knows what is best for us always and will help if we ask.

**Janet:** When my sister was five, she wanted a horse, and one night as she was saying her prayers she asked for one. At the end of the prayer, she was gently advised that we do not ask our Heavenly Father for things we want to *have*, only for what we want to *be*. Properly chastised, the next night she pleaded with the Lord that if she could not have a horse, could she then *be* one?

So, how can we best use our prayer passport to cope with discouragement? One way may be to begin our prayers by first expressing gratitude. When I have been down on my knees in prayer, remembering to begin by expressing appreciation, I have been humbled and gladdened as I have enumerated blessings already in my possession. When I forget that procedure, my burdens seem greater and my cry for help dominates my thoughts. My discouragement often blocks my ability to enjoy the blessings of peace the Lord would have me feel.

Sometimes when our lives are going along just fine and we are very busy, we skip praying only to reach out occasionally when a real need arises. Yet President Howard W. Hunter reminds us, "If prayer is only a spasmodic cry

at the time of crisis, then it is utterly selfish, and we come to think of God as a repairman or a service agency to help us only in our emergencies."

Our Father in Heaven *is* there for us in times of emergencies, as always. But our own ability to listen to his counsel is heightened by frequent prayer. As we pour out our hearts in gratitude as well as supplication, we humble ourselves and see things from an eternal perspective. It is with this celestial attitude that we begin to put our own temporal solutions aside—such as more money or more recognition—and in faith submit to the principle "Thy will be done." When we begin to understand eternal solutions to our problems, we find peace in being given strength to meet our challenges.

**Rex:** This does not mean that we cannot express our needs through our prayers, but as in all requests, thought needs to precede the plea. After we have assessed our blessings, it will be in humility that we pour out our hearts and make known our needs. It is then in great reverence, with gratitude fresh on our lips, that we more fully realize to whom we are speaking, and in whose name we pray.

As Rabbi David Backlock said, "God not only forgives our failures, he sees successes where no one else does, not even we ourselves. Only God can give us credit for angry words we did not speak, temptations we resisted, patience and gentleness that have been little noticed and long forgotten by those around us. Such good deeds are never wasted and not forgotten, because God gives them a measure of eternity."

**Janet:** In times of real discouragement and despair, I try to remember one foolproof method of coping. This method cannot be perfected in a day or in this lifetime, but giving it our best effort pays *big* dividends. What is this secret formula? It is living daily the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is this we must always remember: No matter how alone or discouraged we

may feel, our Father in Heaven is always there to help us.

Recently, during a late-night visit, our daughter Melissa shared this thought with me: “The peaceful feeling I have when I go to bed each night depends much more on how I have lived my day than on anything else that’s happened. If I have read my scriptures, said my prayers, written in my journal, and been kind to others, I can still feel happy and at peace even when I have had a bad day.”

**Rex:** The peace that comes from living the gospel as completely as we know how in every facet of our lives cannot be attained by any other means. Even in the midst of enormous problems, the peace of mind that comes from doing the will of our Father in Heaven will carry us through and make life worth living. And at the end of the day, that is the ultimate perspective that governs everything else. That we may all work toward this end, we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.