

By Persuasion, Long-Suffering, Meekness, and Love

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The ebb and flow of university life creates constant opportunities for reflection. At graduation ceremonies we enjoy the chance to meet the family and friends of our recent graduates. These are some of my favorite moments as we recall their foundational undergraduate experiences, such as how they made an important decision, where couples first met, or poignant memories that shaped them.

Several years ago my wife, Michelle, and I had a formative experience, you could say, as undergraduate interns on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. We met! It occurred in an environment that was vibrant and new to us. The two major political parties were locked in the national conversation that we call a presidential election. It was an intense experience to see Republicans and Democrats politicking around the country, angling for votes, while the nation's capital felt like the epicenter of the action.

Seeing politics up close and in person was sometimes strange and surprising. In addition to hearing from a wide variety of viewpoints, we were able to see the complex mix of policies, parties, and people. We gained new experience watching the media as it conveyed the same news that we were also witnessing firsthand. One Saturday I spent four long hours in

the rain with thousands of volunteers just waiting for a motorcade to pass so we could wave a sign showing support for a few brief seconds. Another student had the chance to jump on a trampoline with a well-known candidate at his fund-raiser. We attended galas and hearings and debates and discussions. We saw glimpses of political stagecraft from behind the scenes. All of this was part of what felt like a national civic theatrical production with the ultimate goal of persuading voters to choose a candidate.

Persuade and Be Persuaded

Life involves persuasion. Each day we are persuaded, and frequently we persuade others. We encounter decisions that force our resolve and judgment. For example, students must respond to a flurry of constant questions: What will I make of my life? What should I study? How will I make a living? How will I make a difference in the world? They may also try to persuade parents to send a little money, professors to reconsider a grade, or someone

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to consider going on a date with them. But each of us is surrounded by and involved with numerous other discussions and debates—for material wants and needs as seen in marketing and consumer society, for the common good through policy and politics, and for the deeper matters of the soul involving faith and conviction.

Persuasion is the art of shaping beliefs and decisions and is an essential part of our lives as consumers, citizens, and Latter-day Saints. Persuasion is also a driving force of academic life. You could say that one role of a university is to house the thousands and even millions of ongoing dialogues among learners about the known and the unknown world. Brigham Young University aims to develop “students of faith, intellect, and character who have the skills and the desire to continue learning” (*The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* [Provo: BYU, 1996], 3). It is in that regard I’d like to explore the notion of persuasion.

Persuasion and the Gospel

We recognize that the greatest power on our planet—the power to act in the name of God, or the priesthood—can be “handled only upon the principles of righteousness” (D&C 121:36). This concept is part of what President Dieter F. Uchtdorf recently referred to as the “owner’s manual” of the priesthood (“Your Potential, Your Privilege,” *Ensign*, May 2011, 59) and what President Heber J. Grant noted to be one of his most oft-quoted verses from the Doctrine and Covenants:

No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned;

By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile. [D&C 121:41–42; see Heber J. Grant, CR, October 1923, 159]

Why are these principles of power and influence included together? What does it say about persuasion, long-suffering, meekness, and love, among other virtues, that makes them essential? And how can they be applied in the myriad of social interactions we have as lifelong learners and disciples?

Early in the Book of Mormon, Lehi had a dream in which his family was commanded to obtain critical records on plates of brass. The only problem was that these records were located somewhere other than where his family was, and it meant doing something that several of his sons weren’t planning on nor were enthused about doing—namely, going back.

Lacking agreement, after “consult[ing] one with another” (1 Nephi 3:10), the sons made the decision on who would face Laban by casting lots. Laman was chosen to head back to Jerusalem. He subsequently failed to get the plates and returned to tell his brothers the bad news.

At this point the brothers were finished, but Nephi wasn’t willing to give up just yet. He gave them a charge:

As the Lord liveth, and as we live, we will not go down unto our father in the wilderness until we have accomplished the thing which the Lord hath commanded us. [1 Nephi 3:15]

His directive was followed by a series of reasons including the need to be faithful, the context of Jerusalem’s wickedness and its imminent destruction, and the key role of the records for linguistic and spiritual continuity. His plea worked.

And it came to pass that after this manner of language did I persuade my brethren, that they might be faithful in keeping the commandments of God. [1 Nephi 3:21]

In this case Nephi persuaded his brothers to do what they should have already understood

was the right thing to do—to go and try again to get the plates. But just like us, they needed to be engaged in a conversation, to be reminded and persuaded. It is interesting to note that for some reason the brothers didn't have a hard time returning once more to Jerusalem to persuade Ishmael and his daughters to join them in the wilderness.

Later on we see how their attitude changed when they lost their commitment to their father's vision and escalated to violence against their little brother. At that point their choices were mitigated by an angel; but Nephi's efforts throughout illustrate the process of persuasion and show how dialogue played an important part in Nephi's relationship to his family and his commitment to truth.

Learning and Persuasion

Today we might associate persuasion with something different from Nephi's familial entreaties. Jay Conger, a professor of business at Claremont McKenna, addressed common misunderstandings about persuasion:

*Persuasion is widely perceived as a skill reserved for selling products and closing deals. It is also commonly seen as just another form of manipulation—devious and to be avoided. Certainly, persuasion can be used in selling and deal-clinching situations, and it can be misused to manipulate people. But exercised constructively and to its full potential, persuasion supersedes sales and is quite the opposite of deception. Effective persuasion becomes a negotiating and learning process through which a persuader leads colleagues to a problem's shared solution. Persuasion does indeed involve moving people to a position they don't currently hold, but not by begging or cajoling. Instead, it involves careful preparation, the proper framing of arguments, the presentation of vivid supporting evidence, and the effort to find the correct emotional match with your audience. [Jay A. Conger, "The Necessary Art of Persuasion," *Harvard Business Review*, May–June 1998, 86; emphasis added]*

Indeed, we know that persuasion is a theme that cuts across many different academic and professional fields. In an even larger sense, persuasion is at the core of the learning process because it changes the way we perceive and understand reality, influencing our attitudes and creating our vision of the world.

Learning involves active engagement in introducing, evaluating, and deciding what ideas have merit and what do not. As a proud graduate of this institution, I feel that one of my formative learning experiences occurred in honors courses where Dean Hal Miller took us into a world of new "conversations" where we could engage in a discussion with some of the greatest minds and on important topics in the world of ideas. We wrestled with Plato, plumbed the Bhagavad Gita, pondered St. Augustine, and wrote alongside Montaigne. Our job as students was to read, question, and determine what was persuasive and what was not. More often than not we missed the point; yet Dr. Miller carefully and patiently explained and answered questions as we stumbled along the path of learning.

As Latter-day Saints, our spiritual foundation influences all aspects of our learning, professions, and family life. Also, experiencing give-and-take and intellectual back-and-forth helps us to increase our understanding and ideally make better decisions, as Hugh Nibley explained in a talk given to Pi Sigma Alpha, the political science honor society:

A discussion with God is not a case of agreeing or disagreeing with Him—who is in a position to do that?—but of understanding Him. What Abraham and Ezra and Enoch asked was, "Why?" Socrates showed that teaching is a dialogue, a discussion. As long as the learner is in the dark he should protest and argue and question, for that is the best way to bring problems into focus, while the teacher patiently and cheerfully explains, delighted that his pupil has enough interest and understanding to raise questions—the more passionate, the more

promising. There is a place for discussion and participation in the government of the kingdom. [“Beyond Politics,” Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless, 2nd ed. (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 306; emphasis in original]

But persuasion is merely a tool, and instruments can be used for differing moral purposes (see Moroni 7:17). Thus it seems essential that section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants places persuasion in close quarters with at least three qualities previously introduced: namely, meekness, long-suffering, and love. These virtues can modify and direct our persuasive efforts, especially as we interact in a world filled with conflict, strife, and disagreement. Let’s consider each virtue separately as we try to understand how they relate to our efforts in persuasion.

Long-Suffering

Defined, *long-suffering* means “an enduring disposition” or “having endured mental or physical discomfort for a protracted period of time patiently or without complaint.” It might seem a stretch to our modern world, but if we hope to persuade others, we must listen to their concerns and create a space for others to engage in conversation, just as Nephi did with his siblings.

Orson Scott Card, an LDS author and frequent columnist, recently observed the following:

Even within our country, some Latter-day Saints will strongly disagree with others about the actions of our government. Because I have written extensively on political matters, I have received many letters from Saints who disagree with me, asking, “How can you hold that opinion and still be a faithful Latter-day Saint?” (Of course, some of the letters are not so politely worded.)

I get such letters about equally from the left and the right, and about almost every topic I’ve covered. . . .

But the point of freedom is that we should not assume that people who disagree with us are unworthy of full membership in our community, or that their voices should not be heard.

On the contrary, it is essential that all voices be heard in order to reach wise decisions that take into account the needs and judgments of all people. [In the Village, “No Nation Is Devoid of Error,” MormonTimes.com, 2 July 2009; emphasis in original]

Students are especially adept at and enjoy new opportunities in social media, in which an incredibly wide range of viewpoints, ideas, and arguments resides. On occasion I have watched with horror as my Facebook page became the staging ground for battles of opposing views mirroring many newspaper discussion boards, sports websites, blogs, and anywhere else that open (and especially anonymous) interaction is allowed. My students tell me that it’s appropriate to delete or censor my online “friends,” but I secretly hope that their inner angels will help these commenters regain a sense of decorum, if not a measure of kindness.

Henry David Thoreau wrote, “Thaw with his gentle persuasion is more powerful than Thor with his hammer. The one melts, the other but breaks in pieces” (*Walden* [1854], 17, Spring). And yet it seems that some of my “friends” would rather be Nordic superheroes than forces of nature. That’s because the language and tone of many comments online preclude a conversation. Discussions can become less about respecting or enduring other views and more about making our point heard.

These discussion enders may be insensitive responses, but as part of communities—especially learning communities—they become deal breakers that replace dialogue with an awkward silence at best and “sharpness” at

worst, usually without the “increase of love” we are advised to employ afterward (D&C 121:43). More important, they demonstrate a lack of long-suffering in our demeanor because we don’t want to have to listen to something that doesn’t fit our thinking. We recognize that not all ideas are equal or even correct—that is why we need to learn. But being long-suffering increases our chances of gaining understanding, and it keeps us connected to those in the discussion.

Clearly this is a very small part of being long-suffering, as many with greater trials can attest. But this important virtue may give us resolve to find ways to stay connected, to be patient, and to try and better understand others.

Meekness

Meekness is another virtue recommended to us, and, like the others, it is a subject matter unto itself. We know that personal growth occurs best when we submit to God’s will, but as President Ezra Taft Benson taught, “Either we can choose to be humble or we can be compelled to be humble” (“Beware of Pride,” *Ensign*, May 1989, 6). One way that we can immediately experience our limitations is through cross-cultural interactions on our smaller, more globalized world.

Cultural differences are rarely more apparent than when we experience another place firsthand. Last year our family traveled across Europe, and while contending with different food, language, and environments—mostly in large, urban cities—our eight-year-old son Jack concluded, “In Turkey they don’t seem to understand our personal space or our family bubble.” In fact, he and his younger brother were regularly pinched, patted, observed, and remarked upon, and he wasn’t really prepared for all of that attention. Buses were crowded, unlike the one he’s used to riding. City streets were filled with a myriad of smells, sights, and sounds that were unfamiliar and even fright-

ening at times. Many things seemed so very different to us—from electric plugs to the experience of worshipping with sixty members of the Church in a city of 13 million people.

In these instances we can withdraw, retreat, or even become outright defensive. We can also fail to see what is happening before us. But when we approach these new cultural adventures with meekness and humility, we can begin to understand our limitations in new ways. In a letter to Edward Partridge and the Church, Joseph Smith wrote from Liberty Jail:

We ought always to be aware of those prejudices which sometimes so strangely present themselves, and are so congenial to human nature, against our friends, neighbors, and brethren of the world, who choose to differ from us in opinion and in matters of faith. Our religion is between us and our God. Their religion is between them and their God. [HC 3:303–4]

Elder Neal A. Maxwell, nearly thirty years ago, addressed this topic here at Brigham Young University, noting:

In the ecology of the eternal attributes these cardinal characteristics are inextricably bound up together. Among them, meekness is often the initiator, the facilitator, and the consolidator.

He further explains the link to persuasion this way:

Since God desired to have us become like Himself, He first had to make us free, to learn, to choose, and to experience; hence our humility and teachability are premiere determinants of our progress and our happiness. Agency is essential to perfectibility, and meekness is essential to the wise use of agency—and to our recovery when we have misused our agency. . . .

In contrast, we see in ourselves, brothers and sisters, the unnecessary multiplication of words—not only a lack of clarity, but vanity. Our verbosity

is often a cover for insincerity or uncertainty. Meekness, the subtraction of self, reduces the multiplication of words.

Without meekness, the conversational point we insist on making often takes the form of I, that spearlike, vertical pronoun. Meekness, however, is more than self-restraint; it is the presentation of self in a posture of kindness and gentleness. It reflects certitude, strength, serenity; it reflects a healthy self-esteem and a genuine self-control. [“Meekly Drenched in Destiny,” BYU fireside address, 5 September 1982; emphasis in original]

Love

Finally, an über-virtue that guides our persuasion efforts is real love. This may well be the hardest part of a gospel approach, because it is so easy for us to become enamored with our own ideas, accomplishments, and interests. It’s also quite difficult to love at close range when our family, friends, or colleagues don’t appreciate our efforts. And it’s even harder still when we face down our real or perceived enemies.

For over five years I attended a number of United Nations conferences in New York, Nairobi, Geneva, and elsewhere in which I was involved in lengthy negotiations with countries and groups that had opposing views on a number of policy issues. This competition of ideas—common to the sports arena, courtroom, and marketplace, or among the electorate—often led to zero-sum outcomes through long negotiation. Try as we might to break through and find common ground, discussions were difficult, and both sides were regularly frustrated. Some of these differences were structural, but I was struck by the degree to which our opposing sides displayed personal animosity and even open hostility.

We occasionally had hard-won victories at the expense of the other side. The lack of empathy was readily apparent, and in some

ways understandable. Since then I have often thought about these experiences and what was to be learned.

Recently, someone who has been involved in these very issues was interviewed. In talking about how to address these types of intractable conflicts, she said that as a result of thinking about them over a long period of time, she recognized the need for and advocated a type of sportsmanship that seems to me to be an essential part of a Christian approach in such areas:

*The need to approach others with enthusiasm for difference is absolutely critical to any change. You know . . . I’m the toughest of fighters. And you know I love a good fight. And I love to win. But I think what I have learned is that you have got to approach differences with this notion that there is good in the other. And that if we can’t figure out how to do that and if there isn’t the crack in the middle where there are some people on both sides who absolutely refuse to see the other as evil, this is going to continue. [“Listening Beyond Life and Choice,” radio interview with Frances Kissling, *Being*, 20 January 2011; Krista Tippett, host; <http://being.publicradio.org/programs/2011/listening-beyond/transcript.shtml>]*

How do we meekly, patiently, and lovingly engage with others, especially when the stakes are the highest? For me this gospel ideal of love warrants our serious consideration. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf observed:

*We must realize that all of God’s children wear the same jersey. Our team is the brotherhood of man. This mortal life is our playing field. Our goal is to learn to love God and to extend that same love toward our fellowman. We are here to live according to His law and establish the kingdom of God. We are here to build, uplift, treat fairly, and encourage all of Heavenly Father’s children. [“Pride and the Priesthood,” *Ensign*, November 2010, 56]*

There will always be times when we must take a stand for what is right. But I believe that we can try to do so in a loving and genuine manner, avoiding ad hominem and mean-spirited attacks. I recognize that possessing love unfeigned is extremely challenging, but I have seen examples throughout my life from my parents, wife, colleagues, and students that give me hope.

Changing Minds and Hearts

Recently, the filmmaker Sidney Lumet passed away. He was known for a remarkable film titled *12 Angry Men*, which portrays the compelling transformation of wide-ranging attitudes in a short period of time. In the film a young man of low social status has been accused of murdering his father. As the title suggests, twelve jurors are chosen to deliberate his fate, and they bring with them lifetimes of experience, pain, and perspective.

The entire 1957 film version takes place in one room and occurs in real time. Initially it appears to be an open-and-shut trial. But one lone juror—Juror #8, played by Henry Fonda—quietly voices his dissenting opinion. He does so through the first part of the film by listening quietly, thoughtfully assessing each juror’s view, and asking probing questions.

As the film progresses, it becomes clear that he is beginning to persuade other jurors, one

by one, but the way in which he does it still surprises me. Through continued engagement with the other men—including the one last holdout juror—and a great deal of silence and discussion, Juror #8 eventually persuades all eleven to the “not guilty” conclusion.

Ultimately, it may be more important how we are persuaded rather than how we persuade. For, while changing our mind is important in learning, the opening of our hearts is critical to our salvation. The scriptures teach that we may know truth and that we may be persuaded “to do good” and to “believe in Christ” through the power of the Spirit (Moroni 7:16; see Ether 4:11–12). Opening our hearts can lead to the greatest blessings.

In the hymn “That Easter Morn,” we sing that Christ overcame “pain,” He overcame “death,” and He can help us overcome “fear” (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 198). Perhaps it is fear that limits much of our ability to listen, learn, persuade—and be persuaded—by others and by the Holy Spirit of God.

I am grateful for the gospel of Jesus Christ that gives us a restart in our frequent frailties and pray that we may be better able to enjoy the full range of discourse and discussion as Christians in the broader world around us, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.