

Begin with the End in Mind

RUSSELL M. NELSON

Our being here reminds us of those days when we were where you are now in your schooling. We had three important goals. One was to *get married*. Then, once married, our next goal was to *get by* financially. Then our goal was to *get through*. We got married when Sister Nelson was an undergraduate student and I was in my second year of medical school.

Because I was under legal age, parental consent was required. My father was very amused when I called him away from his work to sign for me so I could get a marriage certificate. With Sister Nelson's (and parental) help, we were able to make it through medical school after we each received our baccalaureate degree. I then informed her that it was customary to have a year internship. Following that I was determined to specialize, and I let her know that it would require additional training.

I'll confess to a bit of naivete. If we had known that the interval between my getting my doctor's degree and our finally going into practice would be twelve and a half years with six children added, we might not have been quite as enthusiastic in the beginning. So I pay great tribute to her for her role in our partnership. I owe so much to her.

Now I pray for the Spirit of the Lord to direct our discussion tonight.

I have entitled my remarks "Begin with the End in Mind." I suppose some of this comes from my surgical background. An elective incision is never made without planning to close it. The same principle is generally applicable in all fields, however. Track stars don't begin a race without knowing the location of the finish line.

So, in your important race, I would plead for you to begin with the end in mind. To assist you in defining that end, I would ask you this simple question: What would you like said about you at your funeral? Or, if you were to write your own eulogy and you could have only three sentences (no big flowery speeches, please), what would you want to say?

If it's fair for me to ask that of you, it's fair for you to ask that of me. If I were to write what I hope might be said about me, those three sentences would include:

I was able to render service of worth to my fellowmen.

I had a fine family.

Russell M. Nelson was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this fireside address was given at Brigham Young University on 30 September 1984.

I evidenced unshakable faith in God and lived accordingly.

Some of you have already defined your goals. Some have even developed a system of priorities to give order to your interests and responsibilities. I applaud such discipline and think it's useful, but I believe that this ordering process may often be a little artificial. Rarely do we fragment the life that we live. It is not possible to influence one facet of our life without that affecting other aspects as well. So, in my own experience, I have preferred not to compartmentalize my interests, but to synergize them. Let me explain what I mean.

Nephi said, "I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning" (1 Nephi 19:23). He was advising us to weave the fiber of scriptural wisdom into the fabric of our own being.

King Benjamin taught this interrelationship:

When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God. [Mosiah 2:17]

As I ponder serving God, I recognize that I cannot serve him without first serving the children that he has sent to bless our family. Then, as I ponder service to our children, I know I cannot serve them to the fullest without first serving and honoring my wife, the mother of those children.

She is my highest priority. When we were married, we vowed that we would "seek *first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (see Matthew 6:33). Do you see how *these goals and priorities all are indelibly intertwined?* To say that your highest priority will be to your occupation or to your family or to the Lord is really much more difficult than it is to merge strengths and pursue those interests concurrently.

One of the most remarkable things about these three objectives is that they all have one requirement in common. That requirement is education. The educational process is crucial

for success in each objective and is never-ending.

Service to Mankind

First, with regard to service of worth to mankind, I was introduced to you as a heart surgeon. But that really doesn't tell the whole story. When I started medical school, we were taught that one must not touch the heart, for if one did, it would stop beating. But I also pondered the scripture that tells us that "all kingdoms have a law given. . . . And unto every kingdom is given a law; and unto every law there are certain bounds also and conditions" (D&C 88:36, 38). I believed sincerely the scripture that certifies:

When we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated. [D&C 130:21]

Knowing these scriptures while concentrating on the "kingdom" of and the blessing of the beating heart, I knew that even the function of this vital organ was predicated upon law.

I reasoned that if those laws could be understood and controlled, perhaps they could be utilized for the blessing of the sick. To me this meant that if we would work, study, and ask the proper questions in our scientific experiments, we could learn the laws that govern the heartbeat.

In 1949 our group of researchers presented at the American College of Surgeons the report of the first successful use of the artificial heart-lung machine in sustaining the life of an animal for a thirty-minute period of time, without its own heart powering its circulation.

In the decade of the 1950s, successes in the animal laboratory were extended to human beings. Now, with many of those laws learned, the heartbeat can be turned off while performing delicate repairs on the damaged valves or vessels, and then turned on again—provided the laws are obeyed upon which that blessing

is predicated. Over 200,000 open-heart operations are performed in this country annually, and many more worldwide, thereby extending life for many. But you should know that it was through the understanding of the scriptures and “likening” them to this area of interest, that the great field of heart surgery as we know it today was facilitated for me.

Family

Turning now from service of worth to my fellowmen, the second sentence that I hope may be said of me at my funeral would be that I had a fine family. That’s really a subject near and dear to my heart, and I won’t try to treat it broadly except to say that Sister Nelson has brought into our family ten beautiful children. We have tried to treat them consonantly with important scriptures: “Honor thy father and thy mother; that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee” (Exodus 20:12). The importance of honoring parents extends beyond your own father and mother. This scripture implies that we honor the father and the mother of children that might yet be born to us. We considered this implication while dating and in the early years of our marriage. But I fully understood that concept only later as I watched Sister Nelson cradle those children in her arms as they arrived one by one. Each time she reassured herself and her newborn baby that no blessing was ever withheld from that child because of any act of impurity in her life that could have deprived that infant of its full potential in any way. To honor father and mother means to honor fatherhood and motherhood and the divine provision for procreation and all that pertains to it.

Part of honoring parenthood is honoring children. There is a great temptation to believe erroneously that our children are our possessions. They are not. They are sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father. Their spirits are eternal as are ours. This was brought forcibly

to my attention many years ago when our youngest was about four years of age. I came home from work one night to find my sweetheart very weary from a full day with nine children underfoot. My day had been heavy also, but I offered to get the children ready for bed. I began to give the orders to our little four-year-old daughter: take your clothes off, hang them up, brush your teeth, get your pajamas on, say your prayers, etc.—commanding in a manner befitting a tough sergeant in the army. She then cocked her little head to one side, looked at me with her wistful eyes, and said, “Daddy, do you own me?”

Then I realized that I was using coercive methods on this sweet spirit and that to rule children by command or force is the technique of Satan, not of the Savior. She taught me this important lesson: We don’t own our children; we have them for a brief season. As parents, it is our privilege to love them, to lead them, and then to let them go.

The Lord said, “I have commanded you to bring up your children in light and truth” (D&C 93:40). This we have tried to do.

Another aspect of our parental responsibility has been to be faithful to the duty we were called to perform in the Church. Is this a paradox in priorities? No, it isn’t. A scripture states: “Wherefore thy duty is unto the church forever, and this *because of thy family*” (D&C 23:3; emphasis added). We have recognized that among the fine things we can do for our children is to be faithful to any call we have received in the Church. Experience gained in the Church strengthens our capacity to serve the public and our family.

Faith in God

The third sentence that I hope I may merit at my funeral service is that my faith in God was unshakable. I do have a deep and abiding faith in him and his son, Jesus Christ. Education has increased that faith. As I have spent forty years of my life in the study of one of

God’s greatest creations, the human body, I know that this marvelous instrument is of divine origin. The anatomy, the physiology, the protective mechanisms, the healing powers—all are so well constructed and function so beautifully. It is as evident to me that they are the products of a divine creator as it must be for an astronomer to reach the same conclusion as he studies the endless phenomenon of the stars in the heavens.

Furthering education need not challenge, but should increase your faith. In fact, we have a religious responsibility to educate our minds. “The glory of God is intelligence” (D&C 93:36). We have a divine command to “obtain a knowledge of history, and of countries, and of kingdoms, of laws of God and man” (D&C 93:53). Similarly, the Lord exhorted us to “study and learn, and become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people” (D&C 90:15).

The scriptures further admonish, “Learn wisdom in thy youth” (Alma 37:35, see also Proverbs 29:3). “Teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom. Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you” (D&C 88:77–78).

Steps in Learning

We all understand the *importance* of education. Perhaps now we should consider *how* to learn. May I suggest four steps to facilitate the learning process.

Desire

The first is to have a great *desire* to know the truth. As a teacher of surgery for many years, I have observed the differences in desires of individuals to learn. Before every operation there is an interval for scrubbing hands for a measured period of time. Some trainees have either been silent or have passed this time with trivial conversations that had no substance. Those with desire filled that time with questions. I observed that students with great desire

know what they don’t know and seek to fill those voids.

Inquire

The second step would be to study with an *inquiring* mind. Again I take this pattern from the scriptures. You remember that when the brother of Jared was preparing for a transoceanic migration, he realized there was no provision for light in the ships. So he asked the Lord, “Shall we cross this great water in darkness?”

The Lord gave an interesting reply: “What will ye that I should do that ye may have light in your vessels? . . . Ye cannot have windows, for they will be dashed in pieces; neither shall ye take fire with you. . . . Ye shall be as a whale in the midst of the sea” (Ether 2:22–24).

The Lord could have told the brother of Jared what to do, but he was left to study this out in his own mind before proffering the solution. As a result, he selected sixteen stones and then asked the Lord to touch them that they might provide the light for their travel.

That same concept was again stressed in latter-day revelation, when the Lord told his servant, “You have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right” (D&C 9:7–8).

Many of the revelations contained in the Doctrine and Covenants were given to the prophets only after profound study and thoughtful, focused inquiry of the Lord. So it was with the Word of Wisdom and the revelation on the priesthood given to President Spencer W. Kimball in 1978. Similarly, you will learn best with the spirit of inquiry.

Apply

The third step is to *apply* or practice your learning in your daily lives. Those who have learned another language know how important

that is. Even with great desire and study, mastery of a language comes only as it is applied to the daily situations of life.

Pray

The fourth and very important step in the learning process is to *pray* for help. I did not hesitate to communicate with the Lord in great detail, even about the technical steps in a new operative procedure that was to be performed. Often just the process of rehearsing it in my mind while engaged in prayer allowed divine direction for me to see a better way.

A Warning

Now may I offer important words of warning: Learning, if misused, can destroy your goals. Let us consider some safeguards to protect you from such an undesirable end.

Nourishment

Your faith must be nourished. You are blessed at this university to do this by enrolling in religion classes. Enrich that faith additionally with private scriptural study and with exposure to other fine books, art, or music. Nourish the gifts of the Spirit on the same daily basis that you feed your physical body.

Role Model

Choose your role model wisely. Before you endorse all of the teachings of any teacher, ask yourself if his or her *faith* is strong enough to be worthy of emulation. If it isn't, be very discriminating in what you learn from such an individual. Remember that the Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price are the standards by which you should measure all doctrine.

Avoid Pitfalls

Avoid poisons of faith such as sin, pornography, or barely abiding the letter of the law instead of embracing the ennobling spirit of the

law. Remember, "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (2 Corinthians 3:6).

Prepare for Challenges

Many challenges will be put in your way. You will hear allegations that the Church is "anti-intellectual." When people make that statement, I am reminded of a common sight in the jungles of Africa. A bird, like the critic, will often perch on the uppermost part of an elephant. This bird pecks away at the hide of the stately animal, achieving temporary nourishment and position of eminence by virtue of this association. While the elephant doesn't need the bird, the bird needs the elephant for its place of prominence. Though the bird may peck, squawk, and smear, the elephant steadily pursues its course in seeming oblivion to its parasitic passenger.

To the charge that the Church is "anti-intellectual," *you* are the greatest evidence to refute such an erroneous statement. Individually, you have been encouraged to learn and to seek knowledge from any dependable source. In the Church, we embrace *all* truth, whether it comes from the scientific laboratory or from the revealed word of the Lord. We accept all *truth* as being part of the gospel. One truth does not contradict another.

Some of the greatest "intellectuals" have been those with the strongest faith. Socrates felt that the unexamined life is not worth living, so nothing was exempt from his questioning. But he, with Immanuel Kant, had unwavering faith in God, freedom, and immortality. Socrates never doubted the will of his personal God. He believed so much in freedom that he tied his own self-responsibility to that freedom. So deeply did he believe in the doctrine of immortality of the soul that although he might have prolonged his biological life by choosing exile, he submitted with complete serenity to the death sentence of the Athenian court.

Louis Pasteur made this statement on his reception into the French Academy:

The Greeks have given us one of the most beautiful words in our language, the word enthusiasm, which means “a God within.” The grandeur of the acts of men is measured by the inspiration from which they spring. Happy is he who bears a God within! [See Rene J. Dubos, *Louis Pasteur: Free Lance of Science* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1950), p. 392]

Consider the Council of the Twelve. Eleven of them hold baccalaureate degrees. (The one exception was occasioned by the interruption of collegiate education by war.) In addition, there are *seven* earned doctor’s degrees among those twelve men. I must add that educational attainments have not qualified them for their spiritual callings, but they do indicate that their own scholarly pursuits make them not only sympathetic to, but supportive of the divine decrees to gain knowledge.

Fortify yourselves against attacks on the leaders of the Church. They have never purported to be perfect or even close to it. In fact, the Lord described them as “the weak things of the world, those who are unlearned and despised.” But, the Lord continued, they will

“thrash the nations by the power of my Spirit” (D&C 35:13).

Under brutal attack by his critics, Joseph Smith said, “I never told you I was perfect; but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught. Must I, then, be thrown away as a thing of naught?” (*Teachings*, p. 368).

As you edify yourselves with education for the eternities, search the scriptures. Liken them unto you. Learn the law in the kingdom of your own activity. Use the standard works as literal standards of eternal excellence against which you measure every thought and deed.

Begin with the end in mind. Shape your own destiny. Remember that the development of your career, your family, and your faith in God is your individual responsibility—for which you alone will be held accountable.

To you, I extend my love and invoke an apostolic blessing upon you that success will be yours in all your righteous’ endeavors. I testify that God lives, that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the Living God, the head of this Church, and our advocate with the Father. I testify to the divine role of the Prophet Joseph Smith in the restoration of the gospel, and that President Spencer W. Kimball is a prophet today, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.