

Reflection and Resolution

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The title of my message tonight is “Reflection and Resolution,” for indeed this is a time for reflection on activities of the past, and for resolution pertaining to the future. This evening is a real milestone—the first Sabbath day of new semester, of a new year, and of a new decade.

We are pleased to be accompanied by several members of our family, including my father. We had my father, Marion C. Nelson, seated on the stand. Then he felt a little immodest about doing that, so he preferred to sit by the family. But I’d like my father to stand. I want you to know that in four days we will, as a family, celebrate his ninety-third birthday. We enjoy the blessings of both his reflections and his resolutions.

Speaking of age, I’ll relate a spoof attributed to an elderly person who was not as sharp as my father. This gentleman, who was a bit absentminded, quipped that “old age isn’t all bad; your forgetfulness allows you to greet new friends every day, and you can even hide your own Easter eggs.”

When We Were Young

But tonight we should not speak much of age. You are young, and life’s exciting

challenges are yet before you. Sister Nelson and I reflect on times when we were young. We met during our university days. Dantzel was a campus queen when I fell in love with her. I proposed to her while we were picking peas in a pea patch. Then and there we made a resolution that temple marriage was a must for us.

By the time I entered medical school we had become very good friends. Often, after I had spent a morning in the anatomy lab with its pungent aroma of formaldehyde, we ate our sack lunches together on the campus lawn. She always preferred for me to sit downwind from her.

We were married when she was a senior and I had graduated, but I was being recycled—as a sophomore once again, this time in medical school. We were so young that my father even had to sign my marriage certificate. Early married life on the campus was wonderful. With our limited means, we could only afford to share a can of soup for lunch. We

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really worked hard. She received her baccalaureate degree at age twenty, and I became a doctor of medicine at twenty-two. I thought I knew so much. My parents thought I knew so little.

We traveled east for what we thought was to be one year of internship. That year expanded to many years of postdoctoral education, research, and military service. My academic appointments took us to major cities of the central and eastern sectors of the United States as President Taylor has mentioned. In all, more than twelve years elapsed from the time I received my doctor of medicine degree until I was finally able to enter private practice. By then we had six children. But never through that long period of study did Sister Nelson murmur about the lack of material possessions.

Oh yes, there was one exception. I remember a night in Boston when we were walking down Boylston street. She pressed her nose against the windowpane of a furniture store and asked, “Do you think we will ever be able to afford a lamp?”

As you’ve been told, our family grew to include nine daughters and one son. Our son has applied for admission to BYU, well aware of the fact that competition is keen for scarce seats here and that enrollment at BYU is a great privilege available only to a fortunate and steadily diminishing percentage of the youth of the Church.

To each of you I feel a special debt of gratitude. In my apostolic calling I speak with rulers, magistrates, and ministers of many countries. My assignments in 1989, for example, took me to twenty-one different nations. Wherever I go, BYU has a remarkable reputation, for which I thank you. It is known for good among many nations. Truly, the world is your campus.

A New Year, a New Decade

Now, if I had the wish of my heart, I would welcome a private hour with each of you. I

would like to hear your own reflections and then listen to your resolutions for this new year and for this new decade. Somehow I don’t see you as a vast and faceless congregation. I see you as an assembly of individuals, each one a person with unique talents, hopes, challenges, and a powerful potential beyond even your fondest dreams.

I would like to share with you a vision of what each of you can become in your own special way. A proverb of warning applies just as much to you as it did to me in the surgical operating room: “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18).

I would like to provide such vision. So let’s follow the pattern of the Lord, who often chose to instruct his disciples on a high mountain. He also took Moses to a mountain to see the scope of the work that was ahead (see Moses 1:1). To another high mountain the Lord later took Peter, James, and John (see Matthew 17:1). There, power and authority, vision and purpose were given to them to qualify them for the work (see also Isaiah 40:9; Ezekiel 40:2).

I would like to share a similar vision with each of you. Let us imagine that you and I are alone together on a mountaintop.

William, let’s start with you. We reflect first on your accomplishments that have brought you here. I met you initially as a handsome and bright elder on your mission. You rendered such wonderful service. Many people now understand the gospel because of you. Some have even joined the Church. They and their posterity will always hold your name dear to their hearts. Reflections on your mission should always give you a sense of deep satisfaction.

Now, William, what will your resolutions include as you begin a new semester, a new year, and a new decade? What would you like to be? Have you gone to a quiet, secluded spot to be all alone? Have you found your own “Sacred Grove” equivalent, where you can pour out the secret longings of your soul in

prayer to your Father in Heaven? Have you really conversed with God as one man speaks to another? Have you really declared your allegiance to him and your availability to him, without any reservation? Have you said, “Here I am Lord! Use me!”? Have you pleaded with him, and as you did, have you put behind any counterfeit clichés that may have been part of your prayers in the past? Have you cleanly and completely declared your commitment to be a saint, an elder, a righteous disciple through good times and bad? Such a resounding resolution would bring joy to your Heavenly Father.

Now I see Mary—beautiful Mary. You and your future husband plan to be sealed in the temple. I reflect on days when you were small and so full of fun. Now you are a woman, mature and wise.

What will you resolve in your heart to be? You will surely help your husband honor his priesthood as you share its blessings together. I already know of your commitment to chastity. It is the powerful protector of virile manhood and the crown of beautiful womanhood. You will continue in your resolve to be clean—to avoid flirtatious or flippant behavior unbecoming a lovely daughter of God.

You and your companion should resolve never, never to make uncomplimentary comments about one another to anyone at anytime. Good habit patterns are best established during your courtship. Never stoop to demeaning words that hurt. Together, resolve now to make of your home a place of prayer. Make it a sanctuary of faith where servants of the Lord are always welcome and where scriptures are read and discussed together. You will both want to grow in true spiritual symmetry.

Remember, Mary, your partner’s feelings about paying tithing will be in a large measure shaped by your attitude. Words of encouragement from you will help him feel confident in his commitment to tithe, especially during your early years together when pocketbooks are so thin. Plan to introduce yourselves to

your new bishop with resolution to help build the kingdom in the fraction of the frontier where you are called upon to live.

Calls in the Church are not only opportunities to help others, but they will bless your lives, too. The Lord said, “Thy duty is unto the church forever, and this because of thy family” (D&C 23:3). Now is the time to make that resolution to continue to serve the Lord. God bless you, Mary and your partner, and may you always remain best friends.

Next I would like to visit with Natasha. Your last name is usually mispronounced because of its roots in eastern Europe. Think of what has happened in that part of the world during the historic year of 1989. Surely your reflections include gratitude for recent events, not only in your country but in neighboring nations as well.

In 1989 ground was broken for a new Latter-day Saint chapel in Warsaw, Poland. The foundation is now in place. Throughout Poland our missionaries are doing well.

During 1989 our missionaries entered the German Democratic Republic. Hundreds of grateful converts of the Church have since been baptized. New chapels are bulging with faithful Saints who have made covenants to come unto Christ. Also in 1989, native sons from the German Democratic Republic entered the mission field to serve in England, Canada, Argentina, Chile, and the United States of America. The holy temple in the German Democratic Republic, dedicated in 1985, has become a beacon of faith, blessing that country and its neighboring nations.

In Hungary, the first LDS chapel was dedicated less than three months ago. There, too, missionaries have been remarkably successful.

In calendar year 1989, the following countries have abolished constitutional guarantee of communist supremacy and have legalized a multiparty system with free elections: Lithuania (one of fifteen Soviet Republics), Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the German

Democratic Republic, Bulgaria, and Romania. Freedom to vote is closely related to freedom of worship. Both will be doubly welcomed by people who have waited so long. The year 1989 was one of enabling. The year of 1990 will be one of implementing.

Apostolic blessings and dedicatory prayers were offered in many other countries—all evidences of the growth of the Church, not only in your area but in other parts of the world as well. The year 1989 was truly remarkable.

Church membership has just passed the seven million mark. Conservative projections indicate that by the year 2000, the Church will have doubled in size. Its membership will then number at least fourteen million. While we now have 1,730 stakes, by the end of the decade there will be more than 3,600 stakes and many more temples. We will be precisely on course in fulfillment of scriptural prophecy that this work will eventually and literally fill the earth (see D&C 65:2).

Can you possibly imagine what could happen in ten more years like this last one? The next decade could have Pentecostal potential. Truly the hand of the Lord is apparent. He said, “I will hasten my work” (D&C 88:73), and that time of hastening is upon us.

In light of these reflections, Natasha, what will be your New Year’s resolutions? Keep your eye on this big picture. But while you survey large fields, cultivate small ones. Prepare to serve. Take full advantage of your opportunity for an education; it will be invaluable to you. I don’t think it matters much whether you study to become a librarian, a lawyer, or a musician. Complete the course you have begun, and then God can use you to bless people with the fruits of your education.

Next, I would like to visit with Peter. As a relatively recent convert to the Church, you are so happy with the truths of the gospel that have expanded your mind. As you reflect on your past, Peter, remember that before you found the Church, you had many doubts. But

your confusion departed when you discovered the fulness of the gospel. Ignorance was replaced by information, and then by conviction. Next came repentance. You became converted—changed—never to return to the ways of the spiritual skeptic who is devoid of faith.

Your choice of a career is yet a bit uncertain. That can be frustrating at times. But much more important than what you do is what you are. To be your best, will you quietly and personally resolve to remain a believer? Will you continue to nurture your faith in God? Keep your faith strong enough to defend attacks upon your religious conversion? Beware! Wherever you go, there will be clever destroyers of faith, many even masquerading as fellow believers.

Your love for research is a great gift. Cultivate it. As you continue your advanced studies in this university, and perhaps elsewhere, resolve now, Peter, to know what you will do when confronted with ideas contrary to established doctrines of the Lord. Resolve now how you will react to those who stir up contention and contest the teachings of the prophets. Prepare now for the possibility that people of prominent status will deny their own Creator. Their skeptical teachings try to diminish the divinity of the mission of the Savior and even try to nullify the doctrine of the Atonement.

Resolve now to be steadfast. Be like Nephi of old, who did “liken all scriptures unto [himself]” (1 Nephi 19:23). Resolve now never to compartmentalize your faith. Faith is not to be separated from your works but is to be an integral part of your works.

May I share with you some reflections of my own? Years ago, in my research career in a scientific discipline I helped to develop, I found success by applying truths gleaned from the scriptures. Let me explain.

When I first started medical school, we were taught that one must not touch the heart, for if one did, it would stop beating. But later

I 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 also pondered 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).

With these scriptures in mind, I concentrated on the “kingdom” of and the blessings of the beating heart. I knew that the function of even this vital organ was predicated upon law. I reasoned that if laws applicable could be understood and controlled, perhaps they could be harnessed ultimately for the healing of the sick.

To me, this meant that if we worked, studied, and asked the proper questions in our scientific experiments, we would be blessed to learn the laws that govern the beating of the heart.

In 1949 our team of researchers presented at the American College of Surgeons the report of the first successful use of an artificial heart-lung machine. It had sustained the life of an animal for thirty minutes without the animal’s own heart powering its circulation.

In the decade of the 1950s, successes in the laboratory with animals were extended to human beings. Today, many of those laws governing the heart have been learned. As a result, delicate repairs are performed on damaged valves and vessels. The heartbeat can be temporarily turned off and then turned on again—provided the laws are obeyed upon which that blessing is predicated. Hundreds of thousands of open-heart operations are now performed throughout the world every year, thereby extending life for many. But you should know that it was through understanding gained from study of the scriptures, and “likening” them to this area of my interest, that I was able to make the advances I did in the field of heart surgery. But more about that later.

Bless you, Peter, in your desire for excellence in scientific research. Liken the scriptures to the kingdoms that pertain to your own studies. Quietly effect a warm fusion of your faith with your scholarship. Then you will have power, even the power of God, which will bless you and enlighten your way.

In the next concourse I see Dorothy. And I think I can see Dave seated beside her. You don’t have plans for marriage at the moment. That day seems far, far in the future. Meanwhile, your reflections contain a mixture of both sweet and sour memories. Sweet are the happy times of your youth, but sour are the deeds of “friends” who weren’t really friends after all. Some placed sordid temptations before you for which you were ill-prepared at the time. Tonight, on the milestone of this Sabbath evening, what will each of you resolve to be? Now is the time to shape your behavior to your hopes. It is not always easy. I can empathize with you.

Years ago, while I served as a young intern in a large medical center, I attended a Christmas party. The host was the chief of surgery. I had made a major commitment to work for and be loyal to him and his world-famous institution, which had produced many of the great surgeons, scholars, and researchers of our generation. At the party, the chief’s head resident offered alcoholic beverages to Sister Nelson and me. Of course, we politely declined.

Minutes later he returned with a more persuasive pitch: “Take a drink,” he said, “or the chief will be offended.” Again we declined. Our refusal infuriated the head resident. Red-faced and indignant, he said, “Nelson, you take this drink or I’ll make life around here mighty miserable for you!”

I simply replied, “You do what you must, doctor, but I will do what I must.”

I fulfilled my promise, and he fulfilled his.

He saw to it that I had no vacation that year. His responsibility to prepare the schedule

of assignments and on-call duty bore the stamp of his vitriolic vengeance against me. But now, as I reflect on this matter some forty years later, I would not trade places with him today, or ever.

Dorothy—and you too, Dave—remember that decisions are best made before the time of testing, whether those resolutions concern forsaking drugs, alcohol, and other addicting substances, or pornography, which can become an addiction of the mind. Resist any temptations of lust disguised as love. Instead of vice, let virtue garnish your thoughts. To all the Dorothys and Daves here, I urge you to choose companions well and cherish those friends who lift you and make you better in their presence. And be such friends to one another.

In the next section I see Richard. Reflect upon your parents. They sacrificed much so you could be here. I met them both in a stake conference a long distance away. A little unrealistically but very hopefully they said, “When you go to BYU, look for our son, Richard. We are so proud of him.” So Richard, I bring regards from your parents.

What will you resolve to be? If I can read your thoughts correctly, you are committed to strive for personal righteousness. That is a wonderful goal. But it is a little more difficult to measure than a goal to shed ten pounds of unwanted weight, or to run or to swim a measured distance. Come with me to the high mountain, and I’ll suggest some ways in which you can measure your progress toward personal righteousness.

To begin, ask yourself, “What do I think of when I partake of the sacrament? Do I really concentrate on the atonement of Jesus Christ? Do I comprehend the magnitude of his sacrifice and the magnificence of my future as I take upon myself the name of Jesus Christ and resolve to keep his commandments? As his witness, do I worthily partake of the broken bread in remembrance of his broken body? Do I worthily partake of the water, blessed and

sanctified to the souls of all those who drink of it, in remembrance of his blood shed for us?

You can recognize progress each week as you thoughtfully, regularly, and worthily partake of the sacrament.

Here’s another spiritual yardstick: How do you feel about the Sabbath day? I’ll share some of my personal reflections with you. When I was your age, I wondered just what activities were appropriate for the Sabbath. I read lists of do’s and don’ts, all compiled by others. But now I have a much better understanding, which I gained from two Old Testament scriptures. One is from the book of Exodus:

The Lord spake unto Moses, saying,

. . . my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the Lord that doth sanctify you. [Exodus 31:12–13]

A similar message is in the book of Ezekiel:

I gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord that sanctify them. . . .

I am the Lord your God; . . .

. . . hallow my sabbaths; and they shall be a sign between me and you, that ye may know that I am the Lord your God. [Ezekiel 20:12, 19–20]

Pondering these scriptures has helped me to understand. My behavior on the Sabbath constitutes my sign to the Lord of my regard for him and for my covenants with him. If, on the one hand, my interests on the Sabbath day are turned to activities such as pro football games or worldly movies, the sign from me to him would clearly be that my devotions do not favor him. If, on the other hand, my Sabbath interests are focused on the Lord and his teachings, on the family, or on folks who are sick or poor or needy, that sign would likewise be evident to God. I have concluded that our activities on the Sabbath will be appropriate when

we honestly consider them to be our personal sign of our commitment to the Lord.

Next, Richard, prepare to do work of real worth for your fellowmen. This is one of the fundamental reasons for enrollment at this institution of higher learning. The critical difference between your just hoping for good things for mankind and your being able to do good things for mankind is education.

I'll share another personal reflection. Many years ago when I was a young intern, we had a wonderful neighbor lady named Netta Davis. She had a serious heart condition—a diseased mitral valve—destroyed in her youth by the ravages of rheumatic fever. Her husband, Don, was a fellow physician. Because he and I were usually at the hospital, Netta and my sweetheart, Dantzel, became very close friends. Sadly, as the years went by, Netta's strength ebbed. Her congestive heart failure worsened. Her little body finally died because of this malfunctioning valve.

This was long before the advent of surgical repairs within the heart. Such was hardly dreamed of in those days. But Netta's passing changed my life. I determined that her death was not to have been in vain.

Then I joined forces with a small team of researchers at a well-known university. Together we embarked on a project to develop an artificial heart-lung machine, as I mentioned earlier. The ultimate purpose of this effort was to allow repairs to be made within the empty heart while the circulation of the patient's blood was temporarily maintained by the apparatus we were developing.

To make connectors for tubing, I learned quite a bit about glassblowing. And I learned how to operate lathes, drill presses, and other machines required to make pumps, valves, and cylinders. With my associates, I also had to learn the physiological requirements for oxygenation of the blood and the requirements for blood flow to and oxygen consumption of the tissues. We had to learn how to anticoagulate

the blood and then reverse the anticoagulation so normal clotting could again be restored. And we learned the hard way that bacterial contamination could destroy an otherwise successful experiment. Incidentally, the conquering of that problem was the project for my Ph.D. thesis.

Long years elapsed before we were able to graduate from the laboratory to practical application in the operating room of a hospital. But finally it happened in 1951. The human heart could be opened. In the years that followed, thanks also to research in laboratories and clinics at many other universities, defective valves and other components could be repaired. The pioneering road was long and rugged. More than eight years elapsed from the time I received my doctor of medicine degree before I performed the first successful open-heart operation in Utah in 1955.

Netta Davis did not die in vain. Her desperate need motivated me as nothing else could. I thought of her the day I operated upon the heart of President Spencer W. Kimball. In a real sense, it was partially because of Netta that I was able to perform that operation President Kimball needed.

So, Richard, maintain your motivation and perseverance to do work of worth. It will be a measure of your individual righteousness. No matter what your career may be, the long hours of sacrifice and effort required to achieve excellence are really worth it.

Meanwhile, in your quest for personal righteousness, go periodically to the mountain of the Lord's house—his holy temple. There, learn of him. Covenant with him. There and wherever you are, pray to our Heavenly Father in the name of his Son. Merge your faith with your scholarship to give a spiritual depth of focus to all of your righteous desires. Richard, if you will do these things, you will develop an "eye single to the glory of God" (D&C 4:5). Then you will really have 20/20 vision!

As we all contemplate resolutions for a new year, let us reflect on such a special behavioral blueprint given by revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith during the Christmas-New Year holiday season of 1832–33.

These verses from section 88 are worthy resolutions equally applicable in our day for this new year and for the next decade. The Lord said:

Cease from all your light speeches, . . . from all your lustful desires, from all your pride and light-mindedness, and from all your wicked doings. . . .

See that ye love one another; cease to be covetous; learn to impart one to another as the gospel requires.

Cease to be idle; cease to be unclean; cease to find fault one with another; cease to sleep longer than is needful; retire to thy bed early, that ye may not be weary; arise early, that your bodies and your minds may be invigorated.

And above all things, clothe yourselves with the bond of charity, as with a mantle, which is the bond of perfectness and peace.

Pray always, that ye may not faint, until I come. Behold, and lo, I will come . . . and receive you unto myself. [D&C 88:121, 123–126]

Upon each of you, my beloved brothers, sisters, and fellow students, I would like to invoke a blessing as you commence this new decade of your lives. Learn from your personal reflections. Let them help you understand who you are, from where you have come, and what God expects you to be. Let your resolutions strengthen your future. Cherish the privilege of education in this institution. Feast on the words of Christ. Apply his teachings in your lives. Then you will achieve your greatest potential for good. You have been reserved for this time and place in order that the nations of the earth shall be blessed through your efforts.

I testify to you that God lives, that Jesus is the Christ, that this is his Church, that Joseph Smith was and is a prophet of God, that each succeeding prophet has been a chosen instrument in the hands of the Lord for preparing his people for his second coming. Of this I testify, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.