

When Your Bow Breaks

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In the summer of 2001 I was serving as a counselor in the stake Young Women presidency in Stillwater, Oklahoma. For various reasons the stake presidency had come to us and asked us to plan for the next year's girls' camp at a state park within our stake boundaries. The park we ended up selecting had fewer affordable recreational opportunities than our previous location.

We considered a variety of new activities, each with their pluses and minuses. As a Girl Scout leader in Stillwater, I had learned that the local Girl Scout Council provided a two-day course through the National Archery Development Association that gave participants the training to be able to teach basic principles of archery and run a safe archery range. Obtaining the certification would give us access to a substantial discount in purchasing simple recurve bows and arrows. Through personal contacts at the local university I had determined that we could borrow Ethafoam targets and other basic equipment we would need to create a fun and safe experience for our Young Women. The girls loved this new activity. Even after I was released from the presidency, I received an annual invitation to attend girls' camp to run the archery program.

The so-called "fee" for attending the archery training was that I had my name added to a list of adults certified as level-one archery instructors who were willing to be called upon to run the archery range at various Girl Scout camp locations throughout the council. When it came time to renew my certification, I was asked to consider going through the level-two training, which meant that I would be able to teach the two-day, level-one course that I had previously taken. The level-two training was much more in-depth, focusing in greater detail on various equipment options, physical properties of various types of bows and arrows, refinement of shooting technique, and even how to use a bow string jig, a device that allows you to make a custom bow string.

At about the time I finished the level-two training and passed the written exam, I started rereading the Book of Mormon. With all of my newly acquired archery knowledge, when I came to the account of Nephi's bow breaking in 1 Nephi 16, I realized for the first time what a truly remarkable story this is. Like

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much of the Book of Mormon narrative, it is full of understatement. Because none of us here—well, probably none of us—is hunting with a bow as the sole means of providing dietary protein for ourselves or our families and because none of us is currently living in the extreme environment of the Arabian Peninsula, we take the brief details of the story at their simple face value. But doing so means we are not fully appreciating a number of important teachings found in these verses.

While the book of 1 Nephi is probably the most read, or at least the most often read, book in the Book of Mormon, I want to recall for you the details of this particular story. Nephi had just declared “hard things”¹ to his brothers, which included the truth that no “unclean thing [can] enter into the kingdom of God.”² This happened while Lehi and his family had been dwelling in the valley of Lemuel, and Nephi’s words caused his brothers to “humble themselves before the Lord.”³

Following this occurrence, Lehi found the Liahona outside the door of his tent. With direction from the Liahona, the family took their tents and departed “into the wilderness,” traveling in “nearly a south-southeast direction” and pitching their tents first in a place they called Shazer,⁴ which has the meaning of a place with trees,⁵ and then on to other “fertile parts of the wilderness.”⁶ Nephi and his brothers began to hunt with their bows and arrows and stones and slings and were successful in obtaining the wild game the large family needed to survive.⁷ Given the various hardships they had endured during their years in the wilderness, this must have seemed like an especially sweet time. There was plenty of food and, however briefly, Laman and Lemuel were not murmuring.

The point of this story is not to think that hard times are just around the bend when you are experiencing a time of plentitude and blessings. But it is interesting that we frequently find that pattern in the scriptures

and in our lives. In an October 1995 general conference address, Elder Richard G. Scott taught:

*Just when all seems to be going right, challenges often come in multiple doses applied simultaneously. When those trials are not consequences of your disobedience, they are evidence that the Lord feels you are prepared to grow more. . . . He therefore gives you experiences that stimulate growth, understanding, and compassion which polish you for your everlasting benefit. To get you from where you are to where He wants you to be requires a lot of stretching, and that generally entails discomfort and pain.*⁸

So, in continuing our story with Nephi, tragedy—and I don’t use this word lightly or facetiously—struck, and Nephi’s steel bow broke. Whether it was from years of use (a typical modern bow can be shot as many as 100,000 times without losing power when the bow is drawn back) or from corrosion from the high temperature and high humidity in the area or from some other cause, the result was the same. Nephi had lost the means whereby he could provide for his family.

Not only must his heart have been heavy because he and his family were tired and hungry, but Laman and Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael began “to murmur exceedingly”⁹ against the conditions they found themselves in, against the Lord, and, it seems, especially against Nephi. The fact that their own bows had “lost their springs”¹⁰ (from being overshot or from the sheer laziness of not unstringing them at the end of the day and releasing the tension on the bow¹¹) and the fact that they had done nothing to replace these crucial tools seemed lost on them. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, commenting on this story, “One can almost hear them saying, ‘Let Nephi do it. This trip was his idea.’”¹² We are told that even Father Lehi, who was now old and weary, started to murmur against the Lord.¹³ Truly

Nephi, a faithful and devoted servant of the Lord, was in a dire predicament. Or, as Elder Scott has described, the Lord felt Nephi was prepared to grow more.

At this point in the story Nephi did something that was really remarkable. He recorded:

And it came to pass that I, Nephi, did make out of wood a bow, and out of a straight stick, an arrow; wherefore, I did arm myself with a bow and an arrow, with a sling and with stones. And I said unto my father: Whither shall I go to obtain food?¹⁴

Not only did Nephi *not* give in to the all-too-human pattern of complaining and feeling sorry for himself, but he also did a number of remarkable—even miraculous—things. First, he located the only kind of wood in that desert region that would have been suitable for making a bow.¹⁵ Second, with no previous skill as a bow maker, he crafted a bow that was strong and balanced enough that he could shoot moving game with some degree of accuracy. Third, he fashioned a bowstring that was compatible with the strength of the wooden bow. And fourth, he made one arrow that was straight enough that it could be shot accurately and was sharp enough that it would kill game. As a further aside, somehow Nephi would have had to know that he now needed a longer arrow than the one he had used for his old steel bow with its tighter draw.¹⁶ As Hugh Nibley observed, “Though it sounds simple enough when we read about it, it was almost as great a feat for Nephi to make a bow as it was for him to build a ship.”¹⁷

Like Nephi, each one of us is likely to experience the breaking of a bow—a major life challenge that has all the makings of a personal or family disaster or one that has all the makings of an opportunity to grow. In April 2009 general conference, President Henry B. Eyring said, “With all the differences in our lives, we have at least one challenge in common. We all must deal with adversity.”¹⁸ So

what then does this extraordinary story from the Book of Mormon teach us about dealing with the trials and adversity that are part of this mortal experience? I think there are at least six principles we can learn from this story.

Pray

Given what we already know about Nephi from the first fifteen chapters of 1 Nephi, even though we are not told explicitly that Nephi prayed, it seems inconceivable that in this very challenging situation Nephi would not have turned to Father in Heaven in prayer. Prior to this occurrence prayer is mentioned in connection with a number of major events: First, Nephi knew about the vision of the destruction of Jerusalem that Lehi had received, a revelation that came as a result of Lehi’s prayer; second, in response to prayer Nephi’s bands were loosed after his brothers bound him during the journey back into the wilderness with Ishmael and his family; and third, Nephi understood that the vision of the tree of life his father had received could only be understood by inquiring of the Lord—that is, by praying.

When prayer is a consistent part of our daily lives and we have learned to listen for answers to our prayers, we develop confidence in that process. With the still limited preparation Nephi had at that point, perhaps it would have been too much for him to undertake a project as big as building a boat for his family in which to sail to the New World without having had additional experiences to strengthen his testimony of the power of prayer. Certainly it was not just a good guess on Nephi’s part that allowed him to make a bow of hunting caliber but rather divine inspiration that came out of a very regular pattern of calling upon Heavenly Father in prayer.

My guess is that in praying, Nephi did not ask that a new bow, fully formed and ready to solve his problem, be dropped into his lap. If that had been his strategy, it would have been

much easier to have just asked to have fresh game delivered to the door of his family's tent. We know from Nephi's account in chapter 11 that he was allowed to see the same vision of the tree of life given to Lehi after "pondering [Lehi's words] in [his] heart."¹⁹ One way of looking at pondering is as intensive preparation required for meaningful prayer. It seems likely that following some pondering, Nephi's words were not the sometimes rote words we use, "Bless me to . . ." as in "Bless me to make a bow," but instead the more thoughtful question "What can I do to . . . ?" as in "What can I do to make a bow that will allow me to hunt the game my family needs to survive?"

Do

Once Nephi had communed with Father in Heaven in a humble, pleading prayer and had spent time listening to His answer, Nephi had to get up off his knees and act. His family was hungry and temporarily at rest in an area with few alternative food choices to the game he must catch. There was not time for the self-indulgent luxury of self-pity or inaction. He found *nab* wood, the only wood in the area of the Arabian Peninsula thought suitable for making a bow,²⁰ and fashioned a bow out of it. Through inspiration or through actually trying to use the arrows from his steel bow, he realized that he needed a longer wooden arrow. Then somehow he was inspired to make a straight, wooden arrow with a head of sufficient lethality so he could return to feeding his family. His willingness to go and do, as he had previously demonstrated in obtaining the brass plates from Laban, was again manifest in the effort he must have put forth to craft a new bow.

In my own family I have an example of someone who repeatedly went and did even when wallowing in self-pity might have seemed the more natural course. I am so grateful for her example. My great-grandmother Flora Mae Walker was born in Hillsboro,

Texas, on August 14, 1899. Although I spent a fair amount of time around her while I was growing up and she died shortly after my twenty-seventh birthday, I knew surprisingly little about her life while she was living. When I was a child, she was the grandmother who was never too busy to read to me; who invited me to spend the weekend with her at her third floor, walk-up apartment in Baltimore; and who had me work jigsaw puzzles with her. In her later years I would visit her in the nursing home when I returned to Maryland occasionally, but by that point she had severe dementia and the visits were for me—not her. There was nothing in my youthful interactions with her that would have led me to believe she had had a life filled with adversity.

She was the third child of Leonard Newman Walker and Mary V. Rinehart. When she was born, her father was in jail, having been charged with committing arson. Although I had always been told that her mother had died in childbirth, a cousin and I are now pretty certain from research that we have done that her mother abandoned her, leaving her in the care of the doctor who delivered her and his wife. Flora Mae was fortunate in that her father's sisters later took her into their homes, but she moved around with a great deal of frequency—sometimes living with her exonerated father and sometimes not. When she was seventeen she met and married Dr. Playford Rush, a young widowed physician who had come to Texas on assignment with the U.S. Public Health Service. Although doctors did not enjoy the level of income then that they do today, I am sure she thought this marriage was securing her future.

About a year later Playford was sent to Camp Merritt, New Jersey, where he was assigned to run a hospital for soldiers with Spanish influenza and other ailments and to provide for their needs before they were shipped off to Europe to fight in the Great War—World War I. Flora Mae was pregnant

with twin daughters when she and Playford contracted the Spanish flu in October 1918. While an estimated 20 to 50 million people worldwide died in this pandemic, Playford was one of only three Public Health Service physicians who succumbed. Flora Mae survived, but she was a nineteen-year-old widow living 1,200 miles from her family and ready to give birth to twin daughters. From Public Health Service documents at the National Archives, I learned that she had to file a petition to receive any type of survivor benefits and was asked to prove that her deceased husband had contracted the Spanish flu as a result of caring for sickened soldiers. Only a few days before she gave birth to the twins, the panel that reviewed her petition granted her Playford's death benefit.

For the next few years she lived with family in the Houston area and with Playford's family in western Maryland. Then more tragedy befell her. Flossie, one of the twins, died from diphtheria when she was eighteen months old. The other twin, my grandmother Marjorie Rush, survived. Flora Mae remarried in 1923 and had two more children. On Christmas Eve 1935, when the two younger children had the measles, her second husband went out to get medicine and never returned. Surely her bow had broken—at least for the third time—and yet she went and did, perhaps because she was left with few other choices.

At various points, due to economic necessity, my Grandmother Marjorie lived away from Flora Mae with other family members. Later, during World War II, Flora Mae secured a night job working in Towson, Maryland, at the Bendix Radio Factory, where they made military aviation equipment. Almost unbelievably, to save the streetcar fare of a dime each way from her Baltimore apartment, she walked the sixteen-mile round trip. I have not yet mentioned that she was born with a type of congenital hip dysplasia and that she walked with a limp her entire life, making this

five-days-a-week trip on foot in the humid heat of summer and damp cold of winter on the Mid-Atlantic Seaboard a special challenge.

The only way for Flora Mae to get a new bow was to do the hard work of making one—just as Nephi had done. Dennis L. Largey, in a 1991 Sperry Symposium address, observed:

Instead of murmuring, Nephi simply went to work and made another bow. Murmuring wastes time, lengthens one's journey, and hardens one's heart. . . . God may not always stop bows from breaking, but he does help in the construction of new ones.²¹

Turn to Priesthood Leaders

If I had been Nephi and had been able to successfully fashion a new bow and arrow, I think my thought would have been, "If I was smart enough to do this, I can certainly figure out where the game is that I should hunt." And yet Nephi, ever humble, did not do that. He returned to his father, his priesthood leader, and sought his guidance in the matter. Note the interesting pattern that first he prayed; second, he acted on the revelation that he received; and third, he turned to his priesthood leader for further counsel. One of the great challenges that each of us faces in this life is to develop spiritual self-reliance. I have found, as Nephi's story suggests, that we are most prepared to receive counsel from priesthood leaders when we have first communed with Heavenly Father and acted on the inspiration we have obtained.

Read the Scriptures

After Nephi made a new bow and a single arrow, he returned to his father's tent and asked him to inquire of the Lord where he should go to hunt. In answer to this prayer, the Lord told Lehi to "look upon the ball, and behold the things which are written."²² In our day, that ball, the Liahona, has been likened to the scriptures. Although our natures may be to lean to our own understanding²³ and we want

to be dismissive of divine writ when we are facing great challenges, it is frequently then that scripture does hold the answer to dealing with adversity.

On July 7, 2011, four years ago today, I was diagnosed with stage-two invasive ductile carcinoma, a common form of breast cancer. Even though my mother's mother had died from this same type of cancer and my mother had had the same diagnosis as mine two years previously, I was in shock. I had thought this might be something that I would deal with in my late sixties as they had, but I wasn't even fifty. In the space of one phone call I went from someone who I would have considered to be very healthy to someone who was facing a major health challenge. My bow had broken.

One of the key impressions that I had during the time immediately following this diagnosis and while I was trying to determine what my options were was that I should redouble my scripture study. My initial reaction to this strong prompting was, "I am not going to find the cure for cancer or the name of the surgeon I should go to by reading the scriptures!" Yet as I acted on this feeling and read, I received very clear impressions about what I should do and who would be the best to help me in my particular situation. I was focused on the needs of my body, but I learned that the needs of my spirit were every bit as great, if not greater.

After extensive surgery, it was determined that due to my family history an aggressive treatment plan was needed and the best course of action would be a number of rounds of chemotherapy followed by more surgery. About ten days after my first treatment, my hair started to fall out by the handful, my bones ached with a flu-like intensity, and I started to experience the neuropathy—the numbness in my fingers and toes—that would last far beyond the chemotherapy treatments. Although I had tried to mentally prepare myself against it, a certain amount of self-pity

set in. At about this same time came October 2011 general conference. As I tuned in to the first session, I remember praying that there would be something said that would help me in my current situation. In that Saturday morning session, the very first talk that was given was by Elder Scott on "The Power of Scripture." In this wonderful address that seemed to be given just for my personal benefit, he stated the following:

Scriptures can calm an agitated soul, giving peace, hope, and a restoration of confidence in one's ability to overcome the challenges of life. They have potent power to heal emotional challenges when there is faith in the Savior. They can accelerate physical healing.

Scriptures can communicate different meanings at different times in our life, according to our needs. A scripture that we may have read many times can take on nuances of meaning that are refreshing and insightful when we face a new challenge in life.²⁴

Again my attention was turned to the scriptures, but this time as a source of accelerated physical healing—as a way of making a new bow.

Feel Gratitude in Your Circumstances

Thinking about what we know from Nephi, it is difficult to imagine him whining or complaining as he petitioned Heavenly Father for His help. It is harder still to imagine that he would not have offered a prayer of thanksgiving when he was again able to feed his family.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell eloquently stated:

Broken bows litter the landscapes of our lives, representing yesterday's frustrations. These were real enough at the moment. Dotted the same landscape, however, are many more reminders of blessings than of discarded broken bows. May we have the eyes to see that which an outside auditor would surely see as he counts our blessings.²⁵

We too can choose to be grateful regardless of our circumstances—even when our bows have broken. We can receive the calm assurance that our Father in Heaven loves us and is giving us an opportunity to grow. In the April 2014 general conference President Dieter F. Uchtdorf counseled:

We can choose to be grateful, no matter what.

This type of gratitude transcends whatever is happening around us. It surpasses disappointment, discouragement, and despair. It blooms just as beautifully in the icy landscape of winter as it does in the pleasant warmth of summer. . . .

*Being grateful in times of distress does **not** mean that we are pleased with our circumstances. It **does** mean that through the eyes of faith we look beyond our present-day challenges.*

This is not a gratitude of the lips but of the soul. It is a gratitude that heals the heart and expands the mind. . . .

*True gratitude is an expression of hope **and** testimony. It comes from acknowledging that we do not always understand the trials of life but trusting that one day we will.²⁶*

Thinking back to my own health challenge, it would be difficult to honestly feel gratitude for it. Yet I remember feeling a tremendous amount of gratitude in knowing that Heavenly Father was personally mindful of my situation, as shown by a nearly continuous stream of tender mercies that happened throughout that ordeal—of supportive phone calls from out-of-town friends that I hadn't heard from in years, of meals that just showed up at my house, and of thoughtful acts of service rendered by family, ward members, neighbors, and coworkers.

Expect Miracles

When Nephi's bow broke, his life and the lives of his family hung in the balance. What he needed was a miracle in order to find a solution. On lds.org a miracle is defined as "an extraordinary event caused by the power

of God."²⁷ It is interesting that Nephi, Laman, and Lemuel saw many of the same extraordinary events caused by the power of God but that only Nephi recognized them for the miracles they were.

From June 2013 through December 2014 I had the privilege of receiving weekly missionary emails written by Emily Lewis, a BYU student who served in the Australia Adelaide Mission. Sister Lewis frequently concluded her emails with the advice to "remember to look for the miracles every day." Initially I was a little put off by this. However, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that in looking for miracles we demonstrate to Heavenly Father that we are open to and have faith in His power to cause extraordinary events in our own lives and in the lives of others. Nephi had the kind of faith required for a miracle—to build a working bow from the very limited materials at hand and to successfully hunt the game his family needed for their very survival.

We can trust in Heavenly Father that the growth we experience at the points at which our bows break will bring the miracle of blessings previously unimagined. Sometimes the evidence of such miracles may take time to recognize. In thinking back to my great-grandmother Flora Mae Walker, I am sure that she had days and nights of despair, but I consider her posterity: daughters who had happy and long marriages of more than sixty years, grandchildren and great-grandchildren who have made loving homes and had professional success, and even a few great-great-grandchildren who are pursuing excellent educational opportunities such as those found at Brigham Young University. I think surely this is a miracle sprung out of adversity.

I think back to the health news I received four years ago today. Never could I have imagined in that moment or even in the year that followed that I would be standing here today having this opportunity to be the campus

devotional speaker or serving as the university librarian at BYU. How could I fail to see these things as miracles?

Conclusion

President Thomas S. Monson wisely observed, “Our most significant opportunities will be found in times of greatest difficulty.”²⁸ As we pray, act upon the revelation we receive, counsel with our priesthood leaders, faithfully study the scriptures, feel gratitude in our circumstances, and expect miracles, we, like Nephi of old, will be able to make a new bow when ours inevitably breaks. In the language of the Doctrine and Covenants, we will be able to “come off conqueror.”²⁹ I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. 1 Nephi 16:1.
2. 1 Nephi 15:34.
3. 1 Nephi 16:5.
4. 1 Nephi 16:12–13.
5. See Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, volume 5 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley: The Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch with Darrell L. Matthews and Stephen R. Callister (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 78–79.
6. 1 Nephi 16:14, 16.
7. See 1 Nephi 16:14–15.
8. Richard G. Scott, “Trust in the Lord,” *Ensign*, November 1995.
9. 1 Nephi 16:20.
10. 1 Nephi 16:21.
11. See William J. Hamblin, “The Bow and Arrow in the Book of Mormon,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 374–75.
12. Neal A. Maxwell, *Whom the Lord Loveth: The Journey of Discipleship* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 45.
13. See 1 Nephi 16:20.
14. 1 Nephi 16:23.
15. See Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 61.
16. See Hamblin, “The Bow and Arrow,” 392–93.
17. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 60–61.
18. Henry B. Eyring, “Adversity,” *Ensign*, May 2009.
19. 1 Nephi 11:1.
20. See Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 61.
21. Dennis L. Largey, “Enduring to the End,” in *Doctrines of the Book of Mormon: The 1991 Sperry Symposium*, ed. Bruce A. Van Orden and Brent L. Top (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 61.
22. 1 Nephi 16:26.
23. See Proverbs 3:5.
24. Richard G. Scott, “The Power of Scripture,” *Ensign*, November 2011.
25. Maxwell, *Whom the Lord Loveth*, 46.
26. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Grateful in Any Circumstances,” *Ensign*, May 2014; emphasis in original.
27. *The Guide to the Scriptures*, s.v. “miracle,” lds.org/scriptures/gs/miracle?lang=eng.
28. Thomas S. Monson, “Meeting Your Goliath,” *Ensign*, January 1987.
29. D&C 10:5.