

“Where There is no Vision”

L. TOM PERRY

A few years ago on an assignment to Tonga, I was asked to speak to the student body at the Liahona School. As we gathered on the stand, I gazed out over 900 beautiful students seated before me in the school’s cultural hall. After the opening exercises and a special musical number, the entire student body entered into a scripture chase. Scriptural questions were introduced, and all the students who could immediately find the answer in the scriptures would turn to it and then stand up signifying their success in locating the correct scripture. After each question, a number were eliminated. Finally, only six students remained. They were brought up to the front of the hall for the final challenge.

To make everything even, they were invited to place their scriptures on their heads. The instructor would then read the question, and the participants would reach for their scriptures, take them from their heads, find the scriptures, and then hold up their hands signifying success. The first hand in the air was the scripture chase champion.

The young lady who was the winner was absolutely amazing! She placed the scriptures on her head, listened intently to the question, bowed her head, and her scriptures would fall

open in her hands on the page with the correct answer. She was so efficient I thought there must be some trick attached to the game. So I asked the instructor for the list of questions and gave her my set of scriptures. Then I challenged the six students to respond to the question that I would ask, requiring her to use my scriptures to find the answer. She was clearly the winner again, even using my set of scriptures. She was truly a most remarkable young lady.

Tonight I want to use a scripture chase to demonstrate the theme I want to address this evening. I am going to ask four students to participate with me in a scripture chase. The first will be using a Bible printed in 1842, probably a Bible similar to the one the Prophet was using in his studies. The second will use one I carried with me into the mission field in the early 1940s. The third will use our latest edition, printed in 1979. The fourth student will be using the computerized scriptures program,

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LDS-View. The 1842 edition has a concordance. My mission field edition has a ready reference. The 1979 edition has a topical guide. The computer has a program. I will present the scripture I will use as my theme this evening and ask each of the students to find the scripture using the helps each one has available to locate the reference.

The scripture is Proverbs 29:18: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Of course, it was obvious even before this demonstration was started that the computer would be much more rapid than the scriptures we have used before. Scholarship and technology have opened to us new visions and new opportunities to grow and understand as never before. The demonstration also begs the question, Where do we stand as individuals in using these wonderful, beautiful techniques the world is supplying for us today?

Are we still scribes of the 1840s, the 1940s, the 1970s, or are we so excited about what the world has to offer for us in this age that we’re eager to take advantage of each opportunity presented to us?

Opportunities to Benefit Our Fellowmen

The key word in the scripture we used in our scripture chase is *vision*. The dictionary has four specific definitions for the word *vision*. First, “something seen in a dream, trance, or ecstasy; a supernatural appearance that conveys a revelation.” The second, “the act or power of imagination; mode of seeing or conceiving; unusual discernment or foresight.” The third meaning, “the act or power of seeing; sight.” The last and fourth definition is “something seen; a lovely or charming sight.”

The one I would like to make reference to here tonight is the second definition: “the act or power of imagination; mode of seeing or conceiving; unusual discernment or fore sight.”

We are living in a most remarkable period of change. Look what has happened in just the last few months. A short time ago bold

headlines on the front of *Time* magazine declared, “Freedom! The Wall crumples overnight. Berliners embrace in unbelievable joy, and a stunned world ponders the consequences.” The article inside goes on to say,

For twenty-eight years it has stood as a symbol of the division of Europe and the world, the Berlin Wall, that hideous, twenty-eight mile-long scar through the heart of the once-proud European capital—not to mention the souls of the people. And then, poof! It was gone, not physically, at least yet, but gone as an effective barrier between the East and West, opening in one unthinkable, stunning stroke to the people who had been kept apart for more than a generation. It was one of those rare times when history shifts beneath men’s feet, and nothing after is quite the same.

Once there was a break in the wall, there was no way of containing the spirit of the people and their desire to have freedom. A little more than a month later, after these two remarkable articles, the Romanians were trying to comprehend their newfound freedom. A news correspondent for the Associated Press on December thirtieth wrote:

In a passion that fueled Romanian revolution, freedom was spoken again and again. But to a people forced to register even their typewriters, the full meaning of the exotic word was difficult to grasp. “What is it to live free, to travel free, to speak free?” said a young medical student. “We have only seen darkness and silence.” Over the moans of the wounded in the crowded hospital ward, she and some fellow volunteers considered what the term “freedom” meant. “We cannot realize what freedom is,” said another student. “You grow up in freedom, and you do not realize what it means to us.” She paused and frowned and apologized for poor English. “I am sorry,” she said, “I learn English eleven years, and this is the first time I speak it.” We don’t know what freedom means. We don’t

know what to do with freedom. We have no experience, no model, no ideal.

As I have witnessed these exciting events during the last few months, the privilege of living under a system that grants to us the right to live free suddenly has become much more meaningful to me. Maybe it is time for us to listen to their cries and with self-determination make every effort to really understand what this great, God-given blessing means to us here in mortality. Now other nations are anxious for the light of freedom we have enjoyed for over two hundred years. We should become a beacon to lead them to more fulfilling lives. Never has the opportunity and challenge been greater to make our system work the way it was intended than it is today.

We are assembled here as a body of students seeking a higher education. What talent and innate abilities we have brought together under this Marriott Center roof! Let us sit and reason together for a few minutes on how we can maximize the potential power that is in each of us for the benefit of our fellowmen. The first step would be to take full advantage of the educational opportunities available to us at these institutions in which we are currently enrolled.

There is a New Testament scripture that reads:

For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it?

Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him,

Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish. [Luke 14:28–30]

I am afraid there are many of us who have approached our education and life without a vision of what we want or where we want to go. We have not used our power of imagination, or

any mode of seeing or conceiving, or any discernment or foresight. Often I meet full-time missionaries in the field who are ready to return to their homes after completing very successful missions. I ask them, “What comes next?”

Some answer, “I am going to return to school.”

“What are your education objectives?” I ask. The answers come back: doctors, lawyers, merchants, or some other field.

I meet them some months later after they are enrolled in a university or college, and I inquire how their plans are progressing. Many answer, “Oh, I have changed my mind. I am not going to be a doctor. I didn’t like the chemistry requirements.”

The next question, “What are you pursuing now?”

The answer is all too often, “I am in university studies until I can determine the direction I should take.”

Now there is nothing wrong with university studies if it is a well thought-out objective that will lead to something. If it is just a way of marking time until you determine a career you want to pursue, then you are wasting your own precious time and resources and those of the university you are attending.

There was an article in the newspaper the other night that said most university students are taking six years to complete a four-year course. The main reason for the extended time was the periodic change of majors. For a number of reasons, some of you are approaching your schooling as if you are going to the grocery store and using your hard-earned money to purchase four sacks of groceries, paying for all four, and then leaving one on the check stand and walking out.

Not taking advantage of your opportunities in a *timely* fashion, whether here or in any college or university, creates at least two problems. First, there is a great personal loss to you in both time and resources. Second, you are creating a burden on the Church and/or the state,

who carry much of the financial commitment for your education. You are occupying a place and using a resource that someone else could use—one who has not been able to enroll because the schools are filled and, in fact, over their capacities to accept new students. If you are still searching for the direction in which you would like your life to go, maybe time away from school would help you catch the vision you need to give you a direction to pursue.

It is not my objective here tonight to discourage any of you from earnestly seeking after the best education you are capable of obtaining. Without it, you place yourself in a disadvantaged position in an ever-changing world. What I am trying to say is pray, study, seek, plan, test, discuss, and earnestly strive not for the easy and comfortable way, but for the soul-satisfying, diligent, energetic course that will lead you to the opportunities you are seeking.

Enrollment at a school of higher learning is not classified under the heading of an “entitlement” as a result of your birthright, but as a privilege to be appreciated and taken advantage of to the best of your abilities.

Opportunities for Growth

I want to leave you with a couple of concepts to remind you that setting goals brings growth. Thoreau reminded us that men were born to succeed and not to fail. The line between success and failure may be so fine that we scarcely know when we pass it. Often we throw up our hands at times when a little effort and a little more patience would have achieved success. Persistence can turn what seems to be hopeless failure into joyous success. There is no failure except in no longer trying. Failure is not in falling down, but in staying down. There is a single factor that makes for successful living. It is the ability to draw dividends from defeat.

I would like to talk about the premise that growth is the only sign of real life. We accept this

premise in the plant kingdom, and each spring we look for signs of growth to determine if plants have survived the winter and are indeed alive. I believe this is also true for individuals, for families, for businesses, for the Church. Growth is essential to maintain life and vitality. When we think of growth, most of us think of just adding. Growth really has three dimensions: adding, shedding and, perhaps the most important, leveraging our natural God-given talents and strengths. I believe success in any and all dimensions of our lives comes primarily from leveraging our strengths and gifts. I would define “leveraging” for our purpose tonight as using the power and effectiveness we have within us to organize our strengths to gain greater advantage from them.

When I am in need of special motivation to leverage myself toward greater accomplishment, I find that events recorded in the scriptures always seem to inspire and never grow old. Let me use as an example the story of Joseph in Egypt.

Imagine you are Joseph and you find yourself in this situation. In Genesis, chapter 37, we read a remarkable story about a family who had a large number of boys. One of the sons, Joseph, was loved by his father more than his other brothers. To show his love and appreciation for his son, his father made him a coat of many colors. “And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him” (Genesis 37:4).

Joseph didn’t help matters much. He dreamed dreams and then would tell them to his brethren, and they hated him even more. Can you imagine how they felt about a dream like this? He said to his brothers:

Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed:

For, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf.

And his brethren said to him, Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us? And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words. [Genesis 37:6–8]

To complicate the process, his father allowed Joseph to stay home with him, and sent his brethren out into the fields to tend the flocks. Every now and then he would send Joseph out to check up on his brothers. One day when they saw him coming from afar, they felt as if they could stand him no longer and conspired to slay him. They conceived a plan whereby they would kill him and cast him into a pit, then tell their father some wild beast had devoured Joseph.

One of them had compassion on Joseph and did not want the blood of his brother on his hands. He persuaded his brothers to just cast him into a pit where they would not be responsible for his death. Another brother saw a caravan coming from a distance on its way to Egypt and said:

What profit is it if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood?

Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmeelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother and our flesh. And his brethren were content. [Genesis 37:26–27]

And they took their seventeen-year-old brother and sold him as a slave to a caravan going into Egypt, a strange land where they spoke a strange tongue and had strange customs. But the Lord was with this remarkable young man, and he seemed never to be discouraged. Though a stranger and a slave, his countenance must have radiated a special spirit. When offered for sale, he was purchased by a captain of the king's guard. It was only a short time before Joseph had so distinguished himself to the captain that he was made ruler over the whole house. In authority he was the first servant, and he was made overseer over

all the captain had, and the captain put his complete trust, his properties, and his income into the hands of Joseph.

Joseph was a "goodly person" and achieved a position of prominence through the help of the Lord. But trouble began again. This handsome, young man attracted the eyes of the wife of the captain of the guard. One day when he was working alone in the house, she heard him and came in and put her hand on his coat. Joseph, being a righteous young man, knew that this was no place for him, and he loosed himself from the garment she held and fled. The wife was left holding Joseph's garment in her hand. The scriptures record that he "got him out" (Genesis 39:12). Let me point out here that Joseph knew enough to physically remove himself from this situation. He did not stay and permit himself to be tempted when he knew it was wrong.

When her husband returned home, she told a terrible story about Joseph, and the captain became so angry he had Joseph cast into prison. Once again in his young life, he found himself in great difficulty—this time in prison.

But Joseph was not easily discouraged. He set about to become the best prisoner in the prison, and he gained favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison—insomuch so that the scriptures record, "And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners that were in the prison; and whatsoever they did there, he was the doer of it" (Genesis 39:22).

You see, Joseph was given the position of the highest prisoner, and all the prisoners were turned over to his charge. Again in difficult circumstances, Joseph became the best—even as a prisoner he chose the course that led to his growth.

Cast into prison shortly after Joseph were two of the king's officers, the chief butler and the chief baker. Joseph soon became acquainted with them. Both of them had dreams, and they asked him to interpret their dreams. Joseph

was able to do this because he was a righteous man. To one he said, “You will not get out of prison, but lose your life here.” To the other he said, “You will soon have the opportunity of returning to your position of honor with the pharaoh.” Then he asked the one who would soon be restored to his former position to please remember him to the pharaoh so he could be released from prison.

The chief butler was restored to his position of prominence in the king’s service, but forgot all about Joseph in prison for two full years. One day the king had a dream that none of the wise men could interpret. When the chief butler remembered Joseph, he went to the king and said there was a man in prison who could interpret the dream. The pharaoh sent for Joseph. And Joseph, with the inspiration of the Lord, interpreted the king’s dream. The king was so impressed with Joseph that he released him from prison and made him one of his servants. Joseph again so distinguished himself that he became chief in all the land, second only to the pharaoh himself. He turned every situation he encountered into an opportunity for growth.

Because of the service Joseph rendered, the pharaoh said unto his servants, “Can we find such a one as this is, a man in whom the Spirit of God is?” (Genesis 41:38). The pharaoh recognized that he was, indeed, directed by the Lord when he said unto Joseph, “Forasmuch as God hath shewed thee all this, there is none so discreet and wise as thou art” (Genesis 41:39).

Do you see what Joseph’s response was when he was faced with problems? He leveraged every opportunity to take advantage of his situation, to place himself in a position where he could grow, progress, and achieve. In order to maximize our growth, we must identify and be clear on what our natural gifts and talents are. These can be determined in a number of ways, including patriarchal blessings, keeping a track record of our accomplishments, specific testing, talking to others, etc. In our

life’s planning, if we want to have optimal opportunities for success, we need to align ourselves with our natural strengths and gifts.

Struggles Make Us Stronger

We need to consistently and carefully select a few items to add to our growth, including ways of thinking about things, behavior, specific capabilities, and knowledge of skills. In addition to adding, we also need to identify the one or two items that seem to get in our way, that are barriers to our growth, and then shed them. These might include ways of thinking about things or behavior or habits or lack of decision making or whatever they may be. This approach to growth recognizes individual uniqueness and the distinctiveness God has given each one of us, and then positions us to leverage our uniqueness and distinctiveness for our success. This does not assume the path of least resistance, nor does it presume any particular measure of success. It does not assume an economic measure, but rather focuses on becoming all that we can become.

Let us look at learning. A. G. Bennett, in his book on transformation (Claremont Publications, 1978), says: The ability to learn is so precious a quality that it cannot disappear from the perfected man. To be able to learn is to be young, and whosoever keeps the joy of learning fresh within him remains young forever. The ignorant man is like a prisoner that languishes in a narrow cell that will become his grave, because he has not learned that the door is not locked.

Everyone can find within himself or herself inward attitudes of mind and outward habits of behavior that are contrary to their own ideals. Struggle with oneself could also be called self-discipline. Through struggle we become stronger. By ceasing to struggle, we grow weaker. So long as we are dissatisfied and do not know what we really want, we shall probably do plenty of foolish things.

Self-knowledge and struggle with oneself go hand in hand.

Organize your struggles. Choose with what you will struggle. Persistence will do what cannot be achieved by force—persistence is the twin sister of excellence. Do not be afraid of struggle. Remember that what is a present struggle is a key to future happiness. Never stop to regret failures or to excuse them. Paul encouraged us to forget our failures and move on when he told the Philippians, “This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before” (Philippians 3: 13).

President Spencer W. Kimball has said that life gives to all a choice.

We can satisfy ourselves with mediocrity. We can be common, ordinary, dull, colorless, or we can channel our lives to be clean, vibrant, progressive, colorful, and rich. [TSWK, p. 161]

My prayer for all of us here tonight is that with this life of choices we may realize who we are and the potential we have, that we may start today disciplining ourselves to reach for higher goals, to study, to learn, to grow, to determine the course we want to follow as we go through the opportunities of this great mortal experience. We *must* catch the vision of who we really are, for “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18). The Lord will truly bless us mightily with his spirit if we only do our part and utilize the talents and

opportunities he has given us, setting our direction on a course that will lead us back to his presence.

It is always a joy to come to this great place to be with you vibrant, alive students who have so much to offer the world. What a privilege we’re having! What an opportunity! What a contribution we can make to the world in which we live if we’ll only follow the counsel, study, listen, grow, and realize our potential here. Never be satisfied with where you are. Always be reaching out to make the world a better place, to make your sacrifice for the benefit of your fellowmen. Start tomorrow morning with your roommate. Get up and do something nice for her or him. It might be quite a shock to them the first time you try it. We don’t want to have any heart attacks in the morning, so start with something slow and easy. But see what light that brings into your life as you have the opportunity to make that kind of a contribution.

We leave our blessing on each one of you that you may realize your great potential and opportunity—that you may seize upon it and use this opportunity to do the best you can to bring joy and happiness into a great and troubled world. The Lord lives. Jesus is the Christ, the Savior of the world. He has led the way, not through an easy life, but through one most difficult, to give us the greatest of all blessings.

May we follow and be his disciples as we progress through life is my prayer, in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.