

Experience, Excellence, and Obedience=Character

REX D. PINEGAR

I'm glad to be welcome. Facing a group like this, I wouldn't want to be unwelcome. This is a marvelous sight, to see all of you here and feel your heartbeat. I like to think it's yours—perhaps it is mine that's beating so rapidly.

As I consider the position you are in as you start another school year, I have a lot of empathy for you—from both sides of the fence, so to speak. I spent thirteen years, as you have already heard, trying to get out of school and then found myself back in school right here at this institution, for which I am grateful. Brigham Young University has a great impact in the lives of a lot of people, and while you're here I hope that you'll let it make as great an impact in your life as it can.

Tonight we have with us some very special guests. Most of them are wearing blue and white. They're called missionaries. I am grateful to see them. I'm especially grateful to call on you tonight; I need your prayers. You think you need to pray for your investigators—well, I need just that kind of a prayer tonight. As you go throughout the world, you will be facing a group that is somewhat like the group you see here, only you will see them one at a time. You'll see them in their doors and you'll see them on the street; and I hope that, as you leave here to go see them, you will carry with

you the spirit that radiates from your training at the Missionary Training Center and the spirit that is at BYU. The world needs that, just as it needs you.

Tonight I've prepared a message that I hope will be of use to all of you, whether you are a missionary, a student, or a nonstudent. I hope that the Spirit of the Lord will be with us in answer to the prayer that was offered, that both you and I may feel the presence and power of the Holy Ghost so that we may be edified together.

This summer has been an eventful one for me. Much of my time has been spent in assignments with the young men of the Church and with their leaders. One of these occasions was the National Jamboree for the Boy Scouts of America at Fort A.P. Hill in Virginia. The highlight of that jamboree was a special meeting held on Sunday where President Ezra Taft Benson of the Quorum of the Twelve was the speaker. As he addressed those 3,000 Aaronic

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Priesthood young men and their leaders, he spoke to the topic “On My Honor.” Several times during his address he referred to the life of George Washington and the making of this great man. He quoted the following from the foreword of a book he had read about Washington:

We are superbly qualified as makers of excellent machinery, fine automobiles, great spaceships. We have amassed great wealth.

*Yet the times cry out for excellence of a higher order. They demand men fashioned in the likeness of George Washington. We need to know how to make men of his calibre. [William H. Wilbur, *The Making of George Washington*, foreword by Kenneth D. Wells, 1973, p. ix]*

This statement remained in my mind, and, upon returning to Salt Lake City, I obtained a copy of the book from which it was quoted and read it. I made a rediscovery of the truth I already knew—that great leaders do not just happen; they are made through education, experience, and a personal commitment to a high standard of excellence. Let’s talk about those things.

Importance of Education

First, let’s talk about education. That’s what you’re here for, and it will take various forms while you are here. The Lord has said,

Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it. [Proverbs 22:6]

George Washington’s education during his boyhood days occurred largely under the tutorship of his father at his home in Virginia. George’s father, August, received his education at Appleby Grammar School in England. He provided educational experiences for George that were quite similar to the ones which he had received under the headmaster at Appleby. George was given responsibilities of signifi-

cance early in his youth. There was not much time for frivolous behavior on a Virginia farm in those days. His mother would follow up to see that assignments in penmanship, arithmetic, and so forth were carefully recorded by George in his notebooks. (Fortunately for us, the Library of Congress has been able to obtain a large number of those notebooks.) Hour after hour this boy would practice making ovals and circles and slants. They had to be done just right; his father would expect excellence from his son.

In one section of his notebook, George Washington meticulously copied rules of conduct. The Bible provided the foundation for general living, but these rules provided practical guidelines for behavior in everyday life experiences. These rules were to help George develop outstanding social graces and display the marks of a self-disciplined gentleman. August felt that George would be more likely to remember and follow these rules if he had copied them in his own hand. This part of his education must have been based on sound principles, for George Washington was known throughout his life for the strength of his personal demeanor.

Another aspect of George Washington’s education included study of the lives of great men of character and dedication. Addison Cato, which glorified the deeds of the citizens of Rome as patriots of courage and sacrifice, probably helped Washington during his sufferings with his troops at Valley Forge. He admired the early Persians, who were men of virtue and who fled from that which would destroy the mind or weaken the body. Through all his education, Washington benefited from one of his rules: Accept correction with thankfulness. George’s father taught him with love, patience, personal leadership, but also with strict expectation of obedience.

Assignments given were expected not only to be completed, but to be done perfectly. Well, anyone can do things halfway, or almost

anyone can bring in an assignment partly finished, partly fulfilled, partly followed through. But the mark of greatness, as shown by Washington, was to expect from oneself perfection in performance. His father told George that, when one receives correction regarding assignments, it is not merely enough to obey, but it must be done with cheerfulness. Under those conditions, the attitude becomes more important than mere obedience.

Now, George didn't just have lessons. He wasn't just taught certain things to copy in a notebook. He was provided with experience, life experiences on the farm and in the community. His education was carried forward, following his father's death, by his half-brother Lawrence, who had also received his education at Appleby. Lawrence was able to follow through with the same type of instruction, the same type of philosophy, that George had received during his earlier years.

Importance of Experience

The Lord tells us how important experience is. From Doctrine and Covenants, section 105, verse 10, we learn that the Lord has placed us here on the earth—

That my people may . . . have experience, and know more perfectly.

So experience is necessary if we are to understand perfectly the things that we are taught.

George was taught by experience the rudiments of military life and tactics. The discipline acquired through persistence in penmanship during earlier years had trained the muscles and developed the visual perception for excellence in drafting. His studies in mathematics aided him in acquiring greater-than-average competence as a surveyor. Lawrence helped George acquire the opportunities to put skill and learning into practice. George spent long, physically tiring days during those years. Upon the passing of his father, he moved from

his home to live with his brother Lawrence. The move was due to the desire of his mother that he continue his education, even though it would mean that she would be left with more than she could effectively manage on the farm. George would commute on foot or horseback to assist his mother with the planting and the harvesting even though he had spent a full day at his studies. Some of you will appreciate that. Some of you will be working as well as studying. When you get tired, remember George on horseback or afoot. It'll help, I think.

George was also much more adept than was his mother at handling the problems with the slaves. Caring for these matters added to the physical and emotional demands which were placed upon him. The physical strength and the self-confidence that George Washington had developed under the careful supervision and education of his father and his brother provided the stamina and the ability to meet these special challenges. Until Lawrence died, he maintained his concern for George's training and experience. George was then well established in his work as a surveyor.

Great Expectations

We have seen in this brief glimpse of George Washington's life evidence of his personal expectation of perfection in his own performance. He was willing to be meek—that's teachable. The Greek translation of that word *meek* in the New Testament means to be *teachable*, to be willing to listen, willing to cooperate. It certainly describes the attitude of George Washington. Through his willingness to listen and to cooperate, Washington made decisions deliberately. He would not be rushed into a decision, but rather he would wait until as many facts as possible could be obtained regarding the matter under consideration. The strength of such a quality became evident several times during the war for independence. I would suggest that demanding the best from yourselves may not always keep you from

making errors; it didn't keep George from making mistakes. But it will help you to do your best. George always returned to succeed in the area where his education and his experience had previously been insufficient to earn him success. When we do the best we can, we sustain our resolve rather than becoming mired down in the morass of discouragement and regret. Mary Pickford once wrote:

Today is a new day. You will get out of it just what you put into it. If you have made mistakes, even serious mistakes, there is always another chance for you. And supposing that you have tried and failed again and again; you may have a fresh start any moment you choose, for this thing we call failure is not falling down, but staying down.

George Washington never stayed down.

President N. Eldon Tanner has long held before us a personal example of excellence. When asked how he is able to make the many decisions that his duties require, his response is reported to have been most enlightening:

Gather all the facts you can about the matter. Review it in light of past experience with similar situations. Ponder carefully the consequences, pray for guidance, make the best decision you can, and never look back.

He later explained that, if new information comes forward and a change of decision is necessary, it can be made with clear conscience. This counsel applies to you, to me, to all of us. We cannot fail as long as we are doing our best.

Commitment to Excellence

Like Washington, each of us should make excellence the objective of every endeavor. We are here to train our bodies, our minds, and our spirits. We are to use this life to perfect ourselves, to subjugate the flesh, to subject the body to the spirit, to overcome all weaknesses, to govern self so that we may give leadership

to others. George Washington was like the Daniel he read about in the Bible. He was preferred above others of his generation because of the excellence of the spirit within him—excellence in preparation, excellence in experience and in desire to live in complete harmony with God.

Perhaps one of the greatest stories I have heard recently on the importance of this personal commitment to doing our best was an experience of a young man at the Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico. When this young man reported in at headquarters for a particularly difficult trail experience, he weighed only 85 pounds. The pack he was required to carry weighed 35 pounds. The men at the base camp doubted very much that he would be able to make the trek, which included over 280 miles of trail and the performance of specific training tasks at the numerous camps along the way. All of this was to be done within a two-week period. There would be seven other boys in the group who were to make this packing trip. They would be on their own; each man would have to fend for himself. The young man visited with the LDS chaplain, Rulon Doman, prior to going out on the trail from the base camp. He explained to Brother Doman that he just had to make it. He had to reach this goal for himself. He asked Brother Doman to pray for him and to pray that the Lord would give him the strength to carry his own pack. Brother Doman said that he prayed for him and with him, but he still had reservations as he looked at the boy's small stature.

The boy left the camp with the group at the specified time. Twelve days later, Brother Doman met him at a sacrament service up on the mountain trails away from the base camp. Two more days of hiking were to be completed before the trek would be finished. When it was time for testimonies to be borne during the meeting, the young man stepped forward with a testimony of great power. He said,

As I left the base camp, I wondered if I could make it. But I knew that if the Lord would bless me, I would have the physical strength to accomplish the task. At the end of the first day my shoulders were raw with blisters. My feet were sore. I could hardly rest that night, but I knelt in prayer and asked the Lord to please give me the physical strength for one more day, the strength to carry my own pack, to carry my own weight. The next day came. A similar experience occurred. My feet were sore and blistered. I wondered if I could make it. The other fellows were concerned because I was the last one to come up the trail that day. Again that night I prayed. I pleaded with the Lord to give me the physical strength to endure the pain and to carry my own pack, to make my own way. Somehow the next day seemed a bit better. I found that the Lord was my strength. I ate well. I cooked well. I performed all the trail requirements at each camp. I found myself having more and more strength.

Then the young man closed with these words:

I know that the greatest source of physical strength or any other strength is the strength that comes from the Lord if we can just be content to seek for the strength to go one day at a time.

He then expressed his gratitude to the Lord for blessing him and promised Brother Doman that in two days he would lead the team off the trail. He kept his word and, in fact, was the first one to return to base camp. He appeared to be in good physical condition and in great spiritual condition. Relying upon the Lord and expecting the best from himself had enabled him to reach his goal.

Character

You'll think that I just have Scouting stories, and you're right. I happen to have an assignment with the young men of the Church, and I listen to what happens to Scouts because, you see, you were there just a short time ago. You were there in that field of preparation to come

here. Just as George Washington was preparing with his father before he began his training with Lawrence, you were there training before you came here. And so as we look back to those days of experience at an earlier time in our lives, perhaps we can draw from them the strength that we need to go forward today in the new challenges of education. Remember that the requirement is no less in the classroom than it is on the trail. You are still on your own. You are still facing the challenges by yourself, for the decision must be yours. Will you require sufficient from yourself to do your best? Will you be willing to listen, willing to learn, as George Washington spoke about himself? Listen to another experience of a young boy on the trail.

This was one of those boys who is present in almost every Scout troop. He is the one who has wanted to be included in everything but somehow never quite measured up. When his pack was all put together, it seemed that there were always one or two things left out. Maybe it was the salt; maybe it was the cooking equipment. On one occasion he even forgot to pack his bedroll. That spring his Scout troop planned a trip to the high Uintas as a culminating activity for their summer's work and training. In order to qualify, each boy had to take five successive hikes, each one requiring the development of a particular skill that would be needed on this longer venture into the Uintas. This young man worked hard, but every trip seemed to present the same dilemma: something was missing. He didn't quite qualify under the regular circumstances. Well, additional help needed to be given, and his Scoutmaster willingly provided the additional training. After the fifth trip the lad had reached the point where he finally qualified to go on the extended hike. The Scoutmaster was grateful—kind of a mixed gratefulness because he knew that he would have that young man with him on a difficult backpacking trip for several days. He could see himself having to carry the young

man's pack or having to carry the young man himself or discovering that some very important, essential items had been left at home. But the boy had qualified, and so the Scoutmaster cheered him on with these words: "I'm surely glad you made it. Come on, we'll make it together, and you'll really like it."

Well, the day for the trip came, and they started on their way up into the Uintas. As had been anticipated, at the end of the first day's hike something was missing. When they were ready to put up the tent, the stakes had been left out. Quickly they cut some stakes from the limbs of a fallen tree. It wasn't a serious matter; they could put the tent in its rightful place, and the troop could continue on its way.

The second day had barely gotten underway, however, when one of the boy's pack gave way. It had been put on incorrectly and therefore had worn out prematurely. Since each boy had made his own equipment as a part of the requirement for preparation for the trip, the boy again had been responsible for the error. Well, they improvised. The Scoutmaster was able to help him make a new strap from a piece of leather and a belt, and they continued their journey. It seemed that every day was the same.

At the end of the sixth day they reached the summit. They arrived at the close of the day, near sundown. A magnificent scene unfolded before them. The Scoutmaster was pleased and relieved. All the boys had made it to the top. He then looked around, and to his dismay the thing he had feared the most had happened—yes, our young Scout was missing. Where was he? His pack was there, but the boy was nowhere in sight. The Scoutmaster went back down the trail quite a distance, and, still unable to find him, thought he should return and get some help from the other boys. As he came back up the trail near the top, he noticed a clearing that he hadn't seen on his way down. There was the boy. The Scoutmaster walked toward him. As he came closer, he detected

that the boy was kneeling, so he hesitated within earshot and could hear the boy speaking. The boy, out at the edge of the clearing near a rock where he could look down across the peaks over the great valleys, was saying as he named each peak, "Number one, I beat you. I climbed. I beat you." Then he named the next peak, then the next, each time with the same exclamation, "I beat you. I climbed beyond you."

When he reached the fifth peak, tears were streaming down his face, and he repeated again, "I beat you. I beat you. I made it." The boy closed with a prayer of gratitude.

Not wanting the boy to know he was there, the Scoutmaster (Elder S. Dilworth Young) remained hidden from view. He knew that that had to be a moment for the boy to be alone. It was his accomplishment, not the Scoutmaster's. As the Scout came from the clearing where the Scoutmaster stood, the man took the young boy in his arms, held him close to him, and congratulated him on his success.

While these two experiences are examples of great triumph over personal challenges and seem to have been accomplished in a relatively brief time, the principles underlying the successes of these two young men are the same ones which brought greatness to the life of George Washington. You and I, like them and George Washington, must take advantage of our educational opportunities so that our lives will be filled with successful experiences. Successful experiences come when we realize that we have done our best.

"You Can Do It."

Some years ago at this same institution, I looked at myself and said, "I don't think I can make it." And then someone, some teacher, had the courage to say, "You can. I know you can."

I looked at him and thought, "Then you're the only one who does." My report cards wouldn't have revealed that same secret. Maybe it was too well kept a secret. But he

encouraged me and said, "You can do it." He asked me where I was from. I told him, and he already knew. He said, "Yes, I know you're from Spanish Fork. That's my home too. Anybody from Spanish Fork ought to be on the honor roll."

I determined that if a man had that kind of courage—to look at me, to see what I was, and still to have the strength to say, "You can make it"—I would. There was a lot of praying—not just on my part, but on the part of my wife. We wanted to be successful. How grateful I am that the Lord gives us courage, strength, faith, experiences, and opportunities to succeed.

I hope that as you go forward this year and every year hereafter, you will conduct yourselves in such a way as to know that the Lord is pleased with your performance, and then you will be. Only under those conditions can you really do your best. George Washington hoped that he would live in perfect harmony with the Bible. Today we would say, "With the scriptures." He did it because he had the personal commitment to excellence which will build understanding and greatness in a person's life. May each of us commit ourselves to obtain that excellent spirit and to give our best, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.