

“Remember That Ye Are Free to Act for Yourselves”

CLAYNE L. POPE

Some of you may be wondering what it would be like to stand here at a podium where prophets, apostles, presidents of the United States, a prime minister of England, Nobel Prize winners, university presidents, and many learned men and women have spoken—particularly some of you who may feel you are not quite as qualified as those who have occupied this place. As the least-qualified devotional speaker in the history of BYU, let me describe the feeling.

I last felt this way in August 1966, when I was taking prelim exams in economics at the University of Chicago. The purpose of the exams was to ascertain whether or not one could continue on in the doctoral program and whether or not there would be a fellowship for the next year. It was well known that about half of the class failed the exam each time. Fortunately you could take these two four-hour exams over again in six months if you failed, but the exams were a terrifying experience. The stench of fear of failure and feelings of inadequacy were all about me as I took those exams. So, try to recall how you felt when taking the exam for which you were the least prepared. That is the feeling I have here at this podium when I think of the wonderful messages and ideas that have been expressed here.

Your faith and prayers are needed today as never before at a devotional if we are to make valuable use of this time.

I want to start by taking us back to the beginning of mortality here on earth. When introducing Adam into the Garden, the Lord God said:

Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat, But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee; but, remember that I forbid it, for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. [Moses 3:16–17]

This is a remarkable verse of scripture. An omnipotent God forbids the eating of the fruit that carries a consequence of death. Yet he binds himself to allow Adam and Eve to choose for themselves. Their choice, freely made, brought mortality and the need for a Savior and his example of unbounded love and sacrifice. Clearly, agency—the capacity to choose, to make moral distinctions—was a

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central part of the nature of Adam and Eve and an essential part of our Heavenly Father's plan. Today I would like to examine a few of the many facets of agency.

We know that agency played a crucial role in the War in Heaven in which Satan presented a plan to "redeem" all of God's children at the price of agency and the glory of God. In Moses 4:3–4, Heavenly Father indicates that agency was a premortal gift of supreme importance.

Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down;

And he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies. [Moses 4:3–4]

If agency is of such importance that a loving Father would preserve it at such cost, then we should try to understand the implications of agency. Have you ever thought about the wonder of the gift of agency—this rare ability to make choices between good and evil that sets us apart from God's other creations? Volcanos do not have the power to choose when to erupt in order to minimize death and destruction. Asteroids don't change their course in order to steer clear of the earth. Grizzly bears are not waking up from winter hibernation telling themselves that this is the year they are going to quit eating those tender young elk calves. Crabgrass doesn't repent and vow to stop growing in people's backyards. The rest of God's creations were created to be controlled by their nature and to be unaware of good and evil and the need for moral distinctions. But we as humans are different. We have been given this wonderful capacity to decide that something is right or wrong and to change our actions. This ability to distinguish good from evil and to make choices accordingly is an attribute for which we should be grateful each

and every day. Agency is essential to the plan of salvation and eternal life.

Agency, however, does not always make life easy or fulfilling. Agency conveys responsibility. Remember when you first were on your own at college. (Most of the faculty can't remember that far back. Please share your experience with any faculty that happen to be sitting near you.) Remember the delicious feeling of freedom you had as a new freshman—you could stay up till all hours of the night, get up when you wanted, wear what you wanted. (Yes, I know the Honor Code does reduce that feeling a little bit, but your roommate is unlikely to say, "You aren't going out looking like that, are you?") Remember when it first sunk in that you didn't have to go to class. The teacher wasn't taking roll, nor was anyone calling your parents to report your absence. You had absolute freedom of choice.

Then came your first midterms, 20 chapters to read before class on Wednesday, papers due, three-hour finals, and so forth. Gradually it dawned on you that freedom means responsibility or accountability. Agency means risk—risk that is absolutely necessary to bring eternal life, but nevertheless risk. The use of agency often results in pain, suffering, sin, evil, and even eternal damnation. Furthermore, agency implies accountability or consequences. When God gave us agency, we were also given responsibility for our actions. There is a delightful but somewhat strange verse in the Book of Mormon that summarizes this basic principle—2 Nephi 10:23:

Therefore, cheer up your hearts, and remember that ye are free to act for yourselves—to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life.

(Jacob had a nice sense of humor using "cheer up your hearts" and "everlasting death" in the same sentence.)

So here we are—free to choose good or evil, to progress or to fail, to repent or to gain

salvation. There is deep within us the will to be free, the desire to choose for ourselves. We see that will in action in little children as they struggle to “do it themselves.” (When our son, Jeremy, who will graduate from BYU this April, was small, we used to respect his agency by asking him whether he wanted to go to bed now or in five minutes. It made him happy because it affirmed his agency.) We see it in whole nations or peoples who rise up and risk their lives for more freedom.

Yet there is also within us the desire to escape the consequences of those choices, to evade the responsibility, to find the explanation for our wickedness in some place other than in our own choices. That is, we often deny agency. The adversary plays off this all-too-human tendency to seduce us into believing that we do not really have agency and, therefore, we are not responsible for our moral choices. In this century Satan has been extraordinarily successful in convincing us that moral choice is an illusion. He has successfully convinced many people that the gift that God has given us, the gift that Satan wanted to take away from us to have all God’s glory and power, does not exist. Satan’s hostility to agency predates creation—his campaign against agency started in the Garden of Eden, and he has been hard at work ever since with remarkable success. Let me quote President Hinckley on this issue:

*The war goes on. It is waged across the world over the issues of agency and compulsion. It is waged by an army of missionaries over the issues of truth and error. It is waged in our own lives, day in and day out, in our homes, in our work, in our school associations; it is waged over questions of love and respect, of loyalty and fidelity, of obedience and integrity. We are all involved in it. [“The War We Are Winning,” *Ensign*, November 1986, p. 45; quoted by Spencer J. Condie, *Your Agency: Handle with Care* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), pp. 61–62]*

We need to understand what is at stake here and the tactics of the opposing force.

Adam and Eve were told that they could freely choose whether or not to eat the fruit of the tree of good and evil. They were then told the consequences of that choice—mortality. Satan tempted Eve by assuring her that there would not be negative consequences from her choice. “Ye shall not surely die; . . . ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Moses 4:10–11). Notice that there was truth embedded in a terrible lie. Eating the fruit did increase their knowledge, but it also brought death.

The lie was typical of falsehoods about agency in that Eve was assured that there would not be costs or negative consequences associated with this choice—only pleasure or benefits. Such a lie is always seductive because that is what we want. We ache to believe that the path we want to pursue for the moment will be a path without any pain or suffering for us or even for anyone else. We want to choose that which tempts us but want no responsibility for the consequences.

Notice also how both Adam and Eve tried to shift responsibility for their choice. Eve mentioned that the serpent had beguiled her. The explanation that “the devil made me do it” has been a convenient rationalization through the ages. Although it was true that Satan lied and deceived her, he did not have the power to compel her to eat—she chose. Adam’s response may have been even worse, for he began a long tradition men have followed with enthusiasm ever since. He tried to blame his wife, saying that she had given him the fruit. “Now see what you made me do” must be one of the more pathetic phrases that slips out of our mouths from time to time.

But soon Satan’s lie was exposed as Adam and Eve experienced the real consequences of their choice, consequences we’re still experiencing today: the earth is no longer generous, we eat by the sweat of our brow, there is pain and sorrow in childbearing and mortality, and,

worst of all, we are separated from God. I hasten to add that wonderful things came with this choice—the opportunity for life here on earth for each of us with the possibility of eternal life, the love of Heavenly Father manifested through his Only Begotten Son, and the love and majesty of our Savior. But today I want to emphasize the adversary’s response to agency and the human ambivalence about agency.

The essential elements of our condition—the ability to choose; opposition in the form of confusion, ignorance, and temptation; good or bad consequences from the exercise of our agency; and, finally, the tendency we all share either to deny that we have agency or to want the painful consequences of it removed—are the same for us as for Adam and Eve. And the adversary constantly refines his techniques to tempt us. In the 20th century the forces and ideas that reduce our faith in agency are very strong. Once again partial truths are used to deceive.

As our knowledge has grown in both the biological and social sciences, we have discovered many relationships between our behavior and particular individual characteristics or general social conditions. As scholars, we look for associations between specific characteristics and particular behaviors across large groups of people. For example: What biological, psychological, or family characteristics are associated with criminal behavior? We often find such associations and develop models of human behavior. For example, we economists discovered long ago the astounding result that an increase in the price of something reduces the amount people buy. And we have made a good living off this observation ever since. Every day scholars are publishing articles documenting the association between characteristics and behavior. The press loves to report and we love to hear about research that we can interpret as relieving us from responsibility for our actions.

Whenever geneticists find a link between some aspect of behavior and our genes, the

media quickly brings that association to our attention. Then we can blame our parents or fate and excuse ourselves. If you were to look back over the past three decades with the explosion of knowledge in genetics, you would find countless news stories associating genetic inheritance with almost all general classes of behavior—criminal activity, sexuality, mood swings, rationality, intelligence, aggressiveness, and so on. For example, research in the 1960s and 1970s suggested that males with an extra Y chromosome were more likely to commit crimes or to suffer from emotional conditions associated with violent behavior. Magazines and newspapers were talking about the “crime gene.” If you looked carefully at the reports, you found that more than 96 percent of males with the extra Y chromosome lived their lives without any of the reported difficulties. Furthermore, the extra Y chromosome could only account for a very small part of criminal activity. But we are attracted to such stories because they suggest that individuals are relieved of responsibility for their acts; meanwhile, scientists hold out the hope that genetic engineering will fix everything.

These seductive ideas that call agency into question always combine some truth and some error. Social or biological forces do influence our behavior. If we exchange a Y chromosome for one of the X chromosomes, changing a baby from a girl to a boy, there are all kinds of behavior changes. The Y chromosome can’t ask for directions or lower lids in bathrooms, can’t resist changing TV channels unless distracted by a sports program, and quickly reverts to an uncivilized state unless closely monitored. X chromosomes generally can’t explain the infield-fly rule, but they believe hairstyles should be changed frequently and would quickly decorate their cell if imprisoned. Before you send President Bateman those letters complaining about my gender bias, let me reemphasize that these stereotypes are not destiny. There are men who choose to ask directions.

It is humiliating, but they do it. My wife can testify that she has through years of patient work changed one or two of my Y-chromosome habits. Leaving aside the fun, gender does create some differences, but our agency is still intact; gender is not an excuse for any type of inappropriate or sinful behavior.

Just as biologists were documenting the effects of genetic inheritance on our behavior, social scientists were documenting the influence of family background and social conditions upon it. Sociologists measured the effect of poverty, divorce, racism, and bigotry on the social problems of society. Psychologists and psychiatrists inquired into the effect of the subconscious on our conscious behavior, looked at the effects of parents and family background on behavior, and pushed forward our understanding of the biology of the brain.

The translation of sound scholarship to the popular press often lost context and perspective and became the simplistic message people wanted to hear—our behavior was not under our control. Some popular therapists assured people that it was unhealthy to repress their desires, that the important thing to do was to discover who you are and fulfill yourself. To free us from guilt and sin, some intellectuals suggested that good and evil didn't necessarily exist or, at least if they did exist, good and evil were not within us but external. Individuals simply had preferences or different lifestyles. We should all be respectful of each individual's pursuit of happiness. Choices that still seemed questionable—such as becoming a heroin addict or an alcoholic or perhaps eating a two-pound box of chocolates in a single sitting—were treated as diseases or addictions rather than as vices. The commandments became passé.

For at least the last half of this century, there has been a debate between those scholars who argued for nature (genetics and biological influences) as the important determinant of our behavior and those who argued for nurture

(family background and social conditions) as the key influence upon us. Agency was left to the side. Politics in both practice and theory contributed to this widespread perception that individuals were simply pawns in the grip of larger forces. Blame for social problems was often directed toward big institutions such as corporations, schools, universities, and labor unions or toward large impersonal economic forces. Politicians pursued votes by assuring the voters that they were not individually responsible for their plight and by presenting surefire government programs to fix social ills. Tolerance became the supreme virtue. It was as if we were all on a pleasure cruise together. We should all get along and have a good time and be polite and accepting of whatever others did.

Before society holds a party to celebrate our lack of responsibility for what we do, we should understand what we really know and don't know about the effects of nature and nurture on our lives. The studies done by scholars are directed toward isolating some effect that will be significant for a large group of people. This measured effect is an average influence with a great deal of variation around that average. For example, someone raised in a single-parent home may have a somewhat lower probability of obtaining a college degree. But many, many people raised in such an environment do obtain college degrees. Alcoholism may be linked to family background or even a certain genotype, but the links do not account for much of the alcoholism we see. There is enormous variation in individual behavior that goes completely unaccounted for by scientists, even those employing the most sophisticated techniques. A serious look at their research tells us that agency is still alive and well.

Let me give an economic example. An increase in the price of macaroni and cheese mixes at the grocery store will cause a drop in sales because people will buy less on average. However, should you follow individual shoppers around the grocery store, you would have

virtually no success in predicting their purchases. Some would not buy macaroni and cheese mixes at all because they hate them. Some would buy fewer. Some, such as some returned missionaries, might buy more because it may be the only food they recognize outside the bakery. To my knowledge, nothing discovered by either natural scientists or social scientists offers convincing evidence that our agency does not exist or is severely limited.

Please don't misunderstand me. The advances in knowledge of human behavior are worthwhile. They add to our understanding of ourselves and others. Our genes do have an effect on our disposition and on our personality. The way we were raised is very important in determining our attitudes and behavior. Big institutions do have great power compared to single individuals. But in each case when individuals or groups want to excuse behavior or make it seem acceptable to violate the commandments of God, they exploit these partial truths to eliminate individual responsibility for our actions.

Let me now turn to the other side and examine the implications of the fact that our behavior is influenced by outside forces. Just as we err when we become convinced that we do not have agency, we commit an error when we assume that all of the good aspects of our life are due to the superior way in which we have used our agency. We need to remember that other important forces beyond the control of the individual—such as genetics, family background, social conditions, and even luck—do have an effect on the behavior of individuals. The gospel and the teachings of the Savior warn us to be sympathetic toward others.

We are admonished not to judge—at least not to judge unrighteously. I suspect that righteous judgment refers to the necessary judgments of priesthood authority to aid repentance and to protect the Church. Duly authorized civil judges exercise righteous judgment when they facilitate the rule of law. But

judgment is not for the rest of us. We do not have the capacity to judge because any individual's behavior includes influences other than agency. Only the Perfect Judge is able to separate the role of agency from other factors. We should be very hesitant and aware of our inadequacies whenever we are tempted to judge others. Further, we should be quick to forgive for these same reasons. Pride in any of our own accomplishments from accumulation of wealth to athletic prowess to even observation of the commandments should be replaced with gratefulness that we have been so blessed, as well as with an awareness of the good external influences that have affected our lives.

The gospel clearly teaches us that family background, ethnic group, genetics, and so on are not destiny. There are dozens of verses of scripture that refer to our power to choose, the power of agency. We are not locked into a straitjacket of influences beyond our control that determines everything we do. We make moral choices. We are responsible and will be held accountable for those choices.

Consider a few scriptural examples. We know that the sins of one generation do have an effect upon the next generation. Mosiah 13:13 gives just such an example. But verse 14 says that those who repent and keep the commandments will receive God's mercy. Verses 13 and 14 together show agency as well as influences that interact with agency. We also know that the attitudes of the descendants of Lehi and Sariah or the progeny of the half brothers Esau and Jacob were influenced by the antagonisms of the past. Indeed, hatred may be handed down from generation to generation. But that hatred is, in part, chosen and need not be. Many descendants of Laman and Lemuel were converted to the gospel and lived lives of devotion to God and his commandments. Many Nephites rejected the gospel and joined the enemies of their people. A Lamanite named Samuel was a great prophet sent to call the descendants of Nephi to repentance. Prophets

in the Old Testament came from all kinds of backgrounds. One of the greatest examples of family devotion in the scriptures involves Ruth and Naomi, a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law who, according to conventional wisdom, should have been antagonists. Instead, Ruth declared, “Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” (Ruth 1:16). Ruth chose to go with Naomi back to Bethlehem to take care of Naomi. She eventually married Boaz and began a family that became the royal house of David, into which was born the Savior of the World.

The Savior taught us in one of his most familiar stories that social conditions are not destiny. When asked who was our neighbor, Christ gave us the story of the Good Samaritan. My brother Rulon suggested that by focusing on the hypocrisy of the priest and Levite, we may be overlooking one of the great truths in this wonderful story. The three people who encountered the man who was injured by thieves were a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. At the time of Christ, priests who officiated at the altar in the temple were drawn from four extended families held in high regard by the people. Levites assisted these priests in the temple and were also well respected by society. Like Jews, Samaritans thought of themselves as worshipers of Jehovah and claimed a share in the task of rebuilding the temple. Because the Jews rejected the Samaritans, the two groups became estranged to the point that the Samaritans built a rival temple.

If social scientists had been given the problem of predicting who would help the injured person, they would have begun their work by applying for a grant from the National Science Foundation. They would then probably have created a theory of helping based on perceived social distance with the hypothesis that the antagonisms between Jews and Samaritans would create the most social distance, and

hence they would be less likely to help. Or they might have created a theory based on social classes and would need to know the incomes of the priest, Levite, and Samaritan. After all this theorizing, they would take a survey to measure attitudes of priests, Levites, and Samaritans toward helping typical Jews. Then the social scientists would have reported back the probabilities that a randomly selected person from each of three groups—priests, Levites, and Samaritans—would help the injured Jew. Then *Newsweek* or *Time* would do a cover story on charitable impulses, highlighting the antagonism between Samaritans and Jews.

This clearly was not the approach of the Savior. In this story the Savior displayed no interest in group tendencies and refused to define *neighbor* by such characteristics. Instead, he taught us that we are all brothers and sisters, that any of us, regardless of our own background and that of others in need, may choose to help those in distress. He taught us that *neighbor* is defined by what we do, not by who we are. The Samaritan, priest, and Levite had agency to help or not help the injured man; each of the three made a choice freely.

Although the Savior and the gospel emphasize our agency and our responsibility, the adversary emphasizes the reasons we are not responsible for our actions. Satan combines partial truths with falsehoods to make us content and at ease with our sins. He wants us to accept our nature and our behavior. He wants us to believe that change is impossible, that those who preach right and wrong are simply intolerant bigots who don’t understand the modern world. If Satan can convince us that we do not have agency, we become as if we do not and he has won.

But if we step back for a moment and think of the world without agency, we can appreciate the crucial role it plays in the plan of salvation and in our view of life. Imagine a world in which each of us is programmed like a

computer to respond according to external conditions, with no power to make moral choices. Many people see the world in terms that are almost that stark. Consider this quotation from an influential contemporary philosopher reflecting the loss of faith in God, truth, and morality:

Once upon a time we felt a need to worship something which lay beyond the visible world. Beginning in the seventeenth century we tried to substitute a love of truth for a love of God, treating the world described by science as a quasi divinity. Beginning at the end of the eighteenth century we tried to substitute a love of ourselves for a love of scientific truth, a worship of our own deep spiritual or poetic nature, treated as one more quasi divinity. . . .

[And now we have arrived at] *the point where we no longer worship anything, where we treat nothing as quasi divinity, where we treat everything—our language, our conscience, our community—as a product of time and chance.* [Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 22; emphasis in original]

In this type of world there are no real heroes, simply individuals who are programmed to act in ways that we somewhat admire. In this world we might find someone or something interesting but not worthy of emulation because we cannot change. This is not the world I know. Let me briefly recount the life of Maggie Nichols Comer. African-American, she was born in Woodland, Mississippi, to a sharecropping family that had lived on in Mississippi after the end of slavery. Her father died when she was five years old. Her mother then married a man who was physically abusive to his wife and children and who kept them from school whenever it was possible for them to earn the slightest bit of money. At 16 Maggie ran away from home and migrated to East Chicago, Indiana. She worked as a domestic and eventually married Hugh Comer. With the

help of her husband, who was often sick, she raised five children of her own as well as a stepdaughter. She was determined that her children would receive the opportunities that education could provide. She worked very hard, often at two or three jobs, to give her children opportunities. Her husband died of emphysema when her children were in high school. Still she did not let any obstacle deter her from helping her children to achieve all that was possible.

Let me give you a couple of examples of her tenacity. One of her sons who was attending Indiana University needed to take a course in the summer to be on track for his program, but the family did not have sufficient money to finance the education. Maggie Comer called Indiana University and asked to speak to the president. When the operator told her she couldn't just call up and speak to the president of the university, Maggie simply insisted that she had to—and she eventually did obtain financial aid for her son. Once her son Charles had mistakenly received a “pink slip” from school indicating poor work. While driving down a four-lane highway connecting East Chicago to Chicago, she decided to discuss the matter with Charles. Here is her son James' account of this conversation:

She said, “You can do better than that!”

He knew that there must be a mistake but he said, “No, I can't.”

“You can!”

“I can't.”

“You can!”

“I can't.”

Finally Mom got so frustrated she stopped the car in the middle of the street and said, “You can!!!”

Mom was not the best driver in the world. . . . I was always a bit nervous when we got in the car. . . . But this was more than that. We were stopped in the middle of Columbus Drive, the busiest street in town—right in front of the main fire station. Cars were whizzing by and I could imagine that at any

second the fire engines would roar out of the station. I was terrified! I could have choked Charles. Tell her you can and get us out of here, I thought to myself! [James P. Comer, *Maggie's American Dream* (New York: New American Library, 1988), p. 111]

It turned out that the pink slip was a mistake. There were only two black children in Charles' class, and the pink slip was meant for the other boy.

Maggie Comer raised five children, all of whom graduated from college and received advanced degrees. She taught them right from wrong. She taught them that they were responsible for their choices. All successfully pursued their professions with distinction and raised families of their own. Her son James, who tells her story in his book, is the Maurice Falk Professor of Psychiatry and associate dean at the Yale Medical School.

If you wish to believe that an undereducated black woman named Maggie Comer was programmed to use up her life in service to her children and many others, you may. I see her as a heroine who understood the principle of agency. Here is her statement in her own words.

Even as a little barefoot girl back in the country, I had this dream. I had this gift from inside to want something. I thought to myself that if this one could do it and that one could do it, I could do it. And when I couldn't go on, I said my children would do it. People would say black folks can't do this and can't do that—I wouldn't have any of it. Sure, I could see it was harder for black people, but I just wanted a chance. That's what your father used to say, "Just give my people a chance!" [*Maggie's American Dream*, pp. 227–28]

To come a little closer to home, I do not, for one minute, believe that Rex and Janet Lee were simply programmed to meet the challenge of Rex's cancer with extraordinary

courage, grace, and faith. I see them as heroes. Nor do I believe that George W. Grant, C. Allen Huntington, and David Patton Kimball were simply programmed by age 18 to spend that stormswept day in early November 1856 carrying members of the Martin Handcart Company across the 100-foot-wide Sweetwater River. They and the many others who helped these poor stranded pioneers were heroes choosing to face life-threatening conditions to rescue people they had never met.

Without agency, love would be the result of conditioning or genetics and would be trivialized. Agency, on the other hand, gives love meaning and power beyond any force we know. The profound love demonstrated by the Savior in Gethsemane moves us to love him and take upon us his name because it was a gift he chose to give to us. From Luke 22:42 we understand that Christ had his agency and could have chosen not to endure the awful pain and suffering of the Atonement. Instead he chose to yield his will to that of the Father and perform the supreme example of righteous use of agency that the world has ever or will ever know. A world without agency would be a world without progress, without joy, without love, without meaning. That is why a world without agency would be a satanic world.

Agency is inextricably tied to repentance. Without agency we would not sin, nor could we repent. Again, imagine the satanic world in which there is no agency, no choices, no consequences, no progress, no change in us. Think of all the things about yourself that you would like to change. Without agency, all of those characteristics would be fixed. We would only change because the forces acting upon us had changed. We would, like the rest of God's creation, "be acted upon" rather than act for ourselves (see 2 Nephi 2:26). Whenever we tried to improve, we would be like Sisyphus, the king of Corinth in Greek mythology. Sisyphus was consigned by the gods to spend eternity pushing a rock to the top of the hill only to have it

roll down again. Without agency, all of our frailties and sins would be like the rock of Sisyphus. We might try to change our nature, desires, or behavior but without success.

Instead of being like Sisyphus, however, we have this divine gift allowing us to change, to become aware of a sin or mistake we are making, to repent, and to be happy. We can change our desires and actions because we want to bring ourselves into alignment with the perfect model that the Savior has lived for us. Those things that make us or others unhappy can be changed through the great gifts of agency, the Atonement, and the capacity to repent. Rather than seeing repentance as something negative, we should see it as the culmination of the two great gifts that a loving Father has given us—moral agency and the Atonement. With these

gifts we can perform a miracle, an act of co-creation. We can change ourselves into a different and better person. We should celebrate that miracle by using our agency every day to walk with the Savior and use the Atonement to re-create ourselves to be more and more like him.

I leave you my witness that there is within each of us a gift from God we can use to choose either good or evil. Do not be tempted by ideas or rationalizations that suggest you do not have agency and are not responsible. This gift is both wonderful and fearful. It allows us to reach unimaginable heights or the most abject depths by our own desires and acts. May the Lord bless each of us that we may use our agency to bless and improve our own lives as well as the lives of others. I pray for this blessing in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.