

Using Spiritual Maps to Navigate Through Life

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I would like to share with you three experiences in my life that have made me grateful for maps.

My first example: When I moved to Provo six years ago, I purchased a home. Although I looked at many homes in the area, I selected one that was somewhat geographically hard to find. I grew up in Salt Lake Valley, where almost the whole valley follows the same east, west, north, and south coordinates first laid out by Brigham Young. No such universal address system exists across Utah Valley. When one changes city limits, the address coordinate system also changes. That fact, coupled with the unusual boundaries of the cities, makes navigating the streets difficult for those new to the area.

Once I was settled in my new home, I had family and friends who were primarily from Salt Lake come to visit. The streets in Utah Valley were as foreign to them as they had been to me. I gave them explicit but complicated directions to my house. But in every single instance, five to 10 minutes before their expected arrival I received a cell-phone call asking for confirmation that they were headed in the right direction. I didn't think about giving them a map to follow.

My second example: The only magazine I recall coming through the mail to our home when I was a young child, besides Church magazines, was *National Geographic*. My maternal grandparents subscribed to the magazine each year as a birthday present for my father. He enjoyed reading about the far reaches of the world, and I enjoyed the exotic pictures and the enclosed maps. My parents kept these magazines for many years, and my siblings and I relied on them for school reports in pre-Internet days. One map of the world my parents posted on our family-room wall. I always enjoyed looking at that map, and in my early years I envisioned myself visiting all of those places. As I grew older I realized I would never visit all of the lands of the earth, but I still had a desire to travel to those I could reach.

My third example: A few months ago my father's sister—my aunt from Rome, Georgia—passed away. Since both of my parents are deceased, my siblings and I felt strongly that

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our side of the family needed to be represented at the funeral. The only Utah Praters who could get away from other commitments were me, my sister, and my sister-in-law. My father was raised in and around Rome, and all three of us had been there many times. But on all previous trips either my brother or my father had driven, navigating the city and the country roads. They both knew the territory very well.

After the three of us had flown into Atlanta, we realized we didn't have a map. We knew we needed to drive in the northwest direction, but we didn't know on what specific roads. Fortunately, a well-seasoned traveler overheard our conversation and gave us clear verbal directions that we could easily follow in our rented car. Since it was very late at night, we were grateful to reach our hotel without delay. The next morning the first thing I did was buy a map. Navigating around Rome, Georgia, wasn't that difficult, but many of the destinations we needed to reach were outside the city boundaries on country roads. A map of the area was most helpful in directing us to where we needed to go.

These three stories illustrate why I have a gratitude for maps. It was difficult for people to follow my verbal directions to my home because of the complexity of the instructions and the unfamiliar territory in which I resided. I—the person who knew the directions well—was only a phone call away for clarification or reassurance, but a map would have helped them find their way.

The world map on my family's family-room wall gave me a much broader perspective of life. I learned at an early age that my neighborhood was but a small portion of the whole earth. The world map also gave me aspirations to visit lands near and far.

In the third story, the map of Rome, Georgia, gave me, my sister, and my sister-in-law specific grounding in where we were, clarity in where we wanted to be, and the route to take to reach our destination.

Not unlike physical maps, we have spiritual maps to help guide and direct us to our ultimate destination—back to our heavenly home. But sometimes we use the wrong maps to measure our progress along life's journey. One such map is a timeline.

When I graduated from high school I thought I would follow the path of most young LDS women. Using a timeline framework, I would go to college for two to three years, meet a returned missionary, be married in the temple, return to school to finish my degree, and then start a family. We would have about five children and 25 grandchildren. After my husband retired from his very lucrative business, we would serve a senior mission together and then pass into the next life within six months of one another. This was one map I was going to follow—and I did, at least to step one.

I went to college. The rest of my timeline evaporated. The Lord had other purposes for me and directed me in ways I could not have predicted.

Rather than timelines, I propose that better spiritual maps exist for us to follow—namely, the scriptures, our patriarchal blessings, priesthood blessings, prayer, and promptings of the Spirit. For the sake of time, I will focus on only the first spiritual map listed: the scriptures.

One of my favorite sections in the Doctrine and Covenants is section 25, the revelation directed to Emma Smith, the wife of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Although many revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants were given to individuals, the counsel directed to them also applies to us today. As the Lord has said, "What I say unto one I say unto all" (D&C 61:36). The guidance given to Emma Smith is one example of the spiritual maps we can find throughout the scriptures. I will refer to just a few of the verses in this section today.

One of the first pieces of counsel the Lord gave Emma is in verse 4:

Murmur not because of the things which thou hast not seen, for they are withheld from thee and from the world, which is wisdom in me in a time to come.

Emma faced many challenges and was asked to endure many things. My challenges, and I'm certain many of yours, pale in comparison to what Emma experienced. If the Lord counseled her not to murmur, how much more does this counsel apply to us?

The word *murmur* is defined in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary and thesaurus as “a half-suppressed or muttered complaint” and “an expression of dissatisfaction, pain, or resentment.” This definition implies that murmuring is not a boisterous, overt complaint but one that is perhaps stated under our breath or even carried in our heart.

About what types of things should we not murmur? Elder Neal A. Maxwell said:

*Strange as it seems, we sometimes respond better to larger challenges than to the incessant small ones. . . . One can be sincerely grateful for his major blessings but regularly murmur over minor irritations. . . . Enduring large tests while failing the seemingly small quizzes just won't do. [“Apply the Atoning Blood of Christ,” *Ensign*, November 1997, 23]*

So, what are our minor irritations? Perhaps we murmur about individuals: for example, a roommate who borrowed your shoes without asking, a spouse who neglected to put the cap back on the toothpaste, a neighbor who is slow in trimming a bush infringing on your yard, an office receptionist who couldn't answer your question, a motorist who cut in front of your car, a paperboy who missed the front porch, or a BYU professor who would not give you that one extra point that would change your grade from a B+ to an A–.

Or maybe we murmur about events in our lives, such as not getting the English 150 section

we wanted or the apartment we had our hearts set on. We might even murmur over more substantial life circumstances, such as not yet finding our eternal companion or being burdened with extenuating family circumstances. Murmuring is not conducive to feeling the Spirit of the Lord and will, in fact, suppress it.

The Lord's counsel to Emma in verse 10 of section 25 reads: “And verily I say unto thee that thou shalt lay aside the things of this world, and seek for the things of a better.” In reference to this scripture, President Gordon B. Hinckley said:

*I feel he was not telling Emma that she should not feel concerned about a place to live, food on her table, and clothing. He was saying to her that she should not be obsessed with these things, as so many of us are wont to be. He was telling her to get her thoughts on the higher things of life, the things of righteousness and goodness, matters of charity and love for others, the things of eternity. [“If Thou Art Faithful,” *Ensign*, November 1984, 91]*

Maintaining an eternal perspective can help us in so many ways. It can even help us avoid murmuring. Many of the minor issues in our lives today will all but disappear in time. Having been in university administration positions for several years, I have seen this occur over and over and am guilty of it myself. Students, staff, and faculty often have concerns that are small and petty from an eternal perspective but which seem so traumatic at the time—these concerns dissipate and become forgettable the following week, month, or year.

Our attitude plays a large role in avoiding murmuring. A poem recited by then Bishop Henry B. Eyring in October 1989 general conference, speaks to this:

*Some murmur when their sky is clear
And wholly bright to view,
If one small speck of dark appear
In their great heaven of blue:*

*And some with thankful love are filled,
If but one streak of light,
One ray of God's good mercy, gild
The darkness of their night.*

[Richard Chenevix Trench, "Some Murmur When Their Sky Is Clear," in Al Bryant, comp., *Sourcebook of Poetry* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1968), 396; quoted in Henry B. Eyring, "Remembrance and Gratitude," *Ensign*, November 1989, 11]

Returning to section 25, in verse 7 we read that Emma is told, "And thou shalt be ordained under his hand to expound scriptures, and to exhort the church, according as it shall be given thee by my Spirit." Emma Smith was set apart by her husband, Joseph Smith, to be the first Relief Society general president in this dispensation. Emma was to be a leader and a teacher of righteousness and truth. She needed to study the gospel through the scriptures and share her testimony with others. We, too, are asked to become knowledgeable of the gospel through scripture study and to bear testimony of the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Like Emma's calling as the Relief Society general president, we are all called to serve the Lord in formal ways, primarily through our wards and stakes. In October 2007 general conference President Boyd K. Packer reminded us of the lay ministry of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He said:

Everything that is done in the Church . . . is done by ordinary members, the "weak things of the world." . . .

There is the natural tendency to look at those who are sustained to presiding positions, to consider them to be higher and of more value in the Church . . . than an ordinary member. Somehow we feel they are worth more to the Lord than are we. It just does not work that way! . . .

As General Authorities of the Church, we are just the same as you are, and you are just the same as we are. You have the same access to the powers

*of revelation for your families and for your work and for your callings as we do. ["The Weak and the Simple of the Church," *Ensign*, November 2007, 6, 8, 9]*

You will have many and varied opportunities to continue to serve the Lord. All of you will be called upon to serve in leadership and teaching positions in wards, stakes, and beyond. The gifts and talents you have been given can be used to bless the lives of many people if you will willingly accept and magnify your Church callings. Just like Emma, we need to rely on the scriptures to help and direct us as we fulfill these and other responsibilities.

In verse 8 of section 25, Emma is told, "Thy time shall be given to writing, and to learning much." She was supposed to study the things of the world and devote time to expressing her thoughts in writing. Of what should we study and of what should we write?

As BYU students you are currently actively engaged in learning much. At least I hope you are—after all, the BYU motto reads, "Enter to learn; go forth to serve." Hopefully, however, you will not stop learning once you graduate. Learning must be perceived as a lifelong pursuit. Discover ways in which you can continue to have a passion for learning. Read books outside of your discipline. Discover historic sites within walking or short driving distance from your home. Attend community events, such as lectures or concerts. As we read in Doctrine and Covenants 109:8:

Establish a house, even a house of prayer, a house of fasting, a house of faith, a house of learning, a house of glory, a house of order, a house of God.

Speaking of Emma's responsibility to write, President Hinckley suggested that we "keep journals" and "express [our] thoughts on paper." He said:

Writing is a great discipline. It is a tremendous educational effort. It will assist you in various ways, and you will bless the lives of many—your families and others—now and in the years to come, as you put on paper some of your experiences and some of your musings. [“If Thou Art,” 91]

I have been an inconsistent journal writer. Perhaps that is why I chose to include this in my talk. In some ways I was more consistent as a young adult than I have been as an adult. I recall hearing a radio report in the 1990s that as of that day, 2,000 days were left until the year 2000. In my attempt at becoming a good journal writer once again, I committed to write an entry in my journal every day from that day forth until the turn of the century. That way I would have a guaranteed 2,000 entries in my journal. Once I made the commitment I began and successfully met my goal. However, I was so burned out that I have inconsistently written in my journal ever since. I don’t think the goal I set for myself was appropriate, because it didn’t entail the spirit of journal writing as it should be.

Several years after my maternal grandmother passed away, I assisted my mother in transcribing my grandmother’s pencil-written journals. My mother read while I typed on the computer. My grandmother lived well into my young-adult years, and I have fond memories of spending time with her both when I was a child and as a young adult. I knew her well. But the events in the journals I was transcribing took place before I was born. I was touched and inspired by her day-to-day activities, particularly the service that she rendered.

President Spencer W. Kimball had 33 black binders on the shelves of his personal study when he was called to be president of the Church. On many occasions he encouraged the Saints to keep personal journals. In October 1979 general conference he said:

We may think there is little of interest or importance in what we personally say or do—but it is

remarkable how many of our families, as we pass on down the line, are interested in all that we do and all that we say. [“We Need a Listening Ear,” Ensign, November 1979, 5; also “President Kimball Speaks Out on Personal Journals,” New Era, December 1980, 26]

We often remember section 25 for the specific responsibility charged to Emma Smith. In verses 11 and 12 we read:

And it shall be given thee . . . to make a selection of sacred hymns. . . .

For my soul delighteth in the song of the heart; yea, the song of the righteous is a prayer unto me, and it shall be answered with a blessing upon their heads.

In 1835, five years after section 25 was revealed, the first hymnal was published. Those five years were difficult times for Emma. She had given birth to twins who lived for only three hours and had adopted twins, one of whom died of exposure when a mob invaded the home where they were staying.

The hymnbook was entitled *A Collection of Sacred Hymns, for the Church of the Latter Day Saints*. It included 90 hymn texts, 39 of which had been written by Latter-day Saint poets. It was common in that day for hymnbooks to include words only, with no music. This collection of hymns was published in a vest-pocket edition measuring only three inches by four-and-a-half inches.

Emma’s charge was very clear. She was to create the collection of hymns, and she fulfilled her responsibilities dutifully. What is our charge to be? We probably won’t receive a revelation from the Lord as direct as that which Emma received. So how are we to know what to do with our lives? What should be our career? Where should we live? How can we best use our gifts and talents to bless the lives of others?

The scriptures and living prophets can provide us direction in our lives. To speak to

God, we pray. To hear God speak to us, we read the scriptures and feel the promptings of the Spirit.

Let me share another personal experience. When I completed my doctoral work and was looking for a full-time university position, I applied all over the United States. The first serious offer I received was from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. I developed bronchitis on my interview trip. Consequently, I didn't feel as though I had interviewed well. I was amazed when they offered me the position and then gave me a week to get back to them. I had to make a decision.

In Doctrine and Covenants section 9 we are told to not simply ask the Lord what to do but to study it out in our minds, make a decision, and then ask the Lord if our decision is correct (see verses 7–9). I followed this counsel, doing everything in my power to make an informed decision. I learned everything I could about the university and the community, even speaking with local Church leaders and seeking out former students whom I did not know previously. Although I prayed continually throughout the week, I prayed most fervently the morning I needed to return their call with my decision. I told the Lord I had decided to accept their offer. The Spirit witnessed to me rather powerfully that I had made the correct decision, and off I went.

My experience in Carbondale, Illinois, was wonderful, but after three years I knew it was time for me to move on. So once again I started applying for jobs all over the country. One position open was at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. I remember thinking, "I really don't want to move to Hawaii, but this job announcement describes my skills exactly." So I threw my application in the ring. They offered me an interview and then the job. Again I followed the same process I had followed previously in order to determine if the Lord truly wanted me to move so far away from family and friends.

But I did not receive the same strong conviction I had previously received.

During this time I was reading the Book of Mormon. I came across 2 Nephi 29:7, which reads:

Know ye not that there are more nations than one? Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all men, and that I remember those who are upon the isles of the sea; and that I rule in the heavens above and in the earth beneath; and I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth?

I felt as though the Lord was speaking directly to me: "Know ye not, Mary Anne, that I remember those who are upon the isles of the sea?" The Lord did not give me the same type of strong confirmation as before, but He spoke to me through the scriptures, saying, "If you choose to do this, you will not be alone—I will be with you." That was an answer to my prayers.

The opening hymn we sang today has particular meaning to me. It did not appear in the first hymnal Emma Smith compiled because it had not yet been written. The story that has been passed down through the years is that Charles L. Walker was bored during a very long sacrament meeting and amused himself by penning the words "Dearest children, God is near you." After the poem was written, John Menzies Macfarlane set the poem to music. Both Brother Walker and Brother Macfarlane were early pioneers who helped settle southern Utah. "Dearest Children, God Is Near You" was first published in the *Juvenile Instructor* in 1877 and eventually found its way into our hymnal. This hymn is particularly meaningful to me because the music was composed by my Great-Great-Grandfather Macfarlane. Family has conjectured that these two friends may have composed other hymns and songs together, but no others have survived. (See

Karen Lynn Davidson, *Our Latter-Day Hymns: The Stories and the Messages* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988], 125–26.)

At the time I was asked to be a devotional speaker, I was also asked to select an opening hymn. I was fairly stunned by the invitation, and without much thinking I immediately responded, “Let’s sing ‘Dearest Children, God Is Near You.’” Once I began writing my talk, I realized that the words to this hymn corresponded nicely to what I wanted to discuss. The hymn provides a map, not unlike section 25, of what we are to do in this life to return to our heavenly home.

*Dearest children, God is near you,
Watching o’er you day and night,
And delights to own and bless you,
If you strive to do what’s right.
He will bless you, He will bless you,
If you put your trust in him.*

*Dearest children, holy angels
Watch your actions night and day,
And they keep a faithful record
Of the good and bad you say.
Cherish virtue! Cherish virtue!
God will bless the pure in heart.*

*Children, God delights to teach you
By his Holy Spirit’s voice.*

*Quickly heed its holy promptings.
Day by day you’ll then rejoice.
Oh, prove faithful, Oh, prove faithful
To your God and Zion’s cause.
[Hymns, 1985, no. 96]*

Earlier I provided three examples of why I am grateful for maps. These physical maps are not unlike the spiritual maps available to all of us. When my family and friends were trying to find my home, I was only a phone call away for clarification or reassurance. We can always reach our Heavenly Father through prayer. The map on my family-room wall as a child helped me see my life in a much broader perspective—similar to the eternal perspective Heavenly Father wishes us to take. And the map of Rome, Georgia, provided specific directions to get to our destination, not unlike the scriptures, patriarchal blessings, other priesthood blessings, and promptings of the Spirit.

Not only am I grateful for physical maps, I am grateful that we have been given spiritual maps as well. I leave you with my testimony of Jesus Christ. I know He lives. I know He knows and loves each of us. I know He will help guide and direct our lives if we will but do our part. May we always keep our eye on “the things of eternity” and rely on our spiritual maps as we navigate through this life is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.