

Our Journey into the Wilderness

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I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today. And I'm grateful to my family, my students, and all of those who have supported me in this effort. I've been part of the BYU community much of my life, from the time my father taught here while I was growing up to when I was a student here in the 1970s to my return as a professor a dozen years ago. It's been a great privilege for me to be associated with BYU and the fine people who are committed to learning in the light of the gospel—a meshing of the Spirit and the intellect.

As I look back to my college years a long time ago, I realize that my BYU education prepared me to become not only a scholar, a citizen, a wife, and a mother but also a Latter-day Saint. My hope is that my words today will especially help you students in your spiritual training that is an integral part of the educational enterprise at this university.

Today I will talk about the crossroads of my scholarly and spiritual lives by pondering the idea of life journeys. I study the history of travel and tourism, and in my most recent book I wrote about the history of family vacationing in post-World War II America. Studying travel and tourism provides a lens through which I view the currents of change, and it allows me

to better see how those changes came about and what they mean to us today.

In preparing this talk I realized that the scriptures are replete with stories of travel—defined as moving through space over time in a departure from daily routine. Some scriptural journeys begin as rather everyday pedestrian trips but become momentous through miracles. My first thought was of Paul's trip to Damascus, when he lost his sight and became converted to Christianity, as told in Acts 22. Other journeys, like the flight of Mary and Joseph with the infant Jesus, are undertaken to escape enemies. Perhaps the greatest journeys are the migrations of an entire people—like the pioneer trek of our ancestors from Illinois to here in the West to build Zion.

By studying these journeys we can gain new insights into our own life journey: from the premortal existence to our birth, our maturation into adults, and our eventual return to our Father in Heaven after we die and are redeemed by the sacrifice of our Savior.

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Today I want to focus on a particular kind of travel experience that we read about in the scriptures: a journey into the wilderness. While not all of you will have traveled in an area uninhabited by humans—the definition of *wilderness*—all of us travel into an unknown future, a figurative wilderness. By considering our journeys into the wilderness—whether literal, such as a weekend camping trip, or figurative, such as our future—today I will draw upon scripture and my own experiences to discuss how we can prepare now to find our way through the unknown territory through which we will travel in our lives. I believe that by so doing we can derive greater meaning from our own journeys into the wilderness.

So I want to divide my topic today into three stages of travel: first, we prepare for the journey ahead; second, we undergo the journey into the wilderness; and third, like historians, we reflect back on our journey to make meaning out of our experience.

Stage 1: Preparing for the Journey

By now all you freshmen taking Religion 121 are well versed in the particulars of Lehi's journey that open the Book of Mormon. If we read carefully from 1 Nephi 2, we gather that preparations were brief:

And it came to pass that the Lord commanded my father, even in a dream, that he should take his family and depart into the wilderness.

And it came to pass that he was obedient unto the word of the Lord, wherefore he did as the Lord commanded him.

And it came to pass that he departed into the wilderness. And he left his house, and the land of his inheritance, and his gold, and his silver, and his precious things, and took nothing with him, save it were his family, and provisions, and tents, and departed into the wilderness. [1 Nephi 2:2–4]

From these verses we understand that the Lord commanded Lehi to take his family and

journey into the wilderness, that Lehi was obedient, and that the whole family (his wife, Sariah, and their four sons—Laman, Lemuel, Nephi, and Sam) went together into the wilderness. We know very little about Lehi's preparations, but we can make some assumptions. We can assume he sold or gave away his house, the land he had inherited, his silver and gold, and all "his precious things." Lehi and Sariah left everything and took only tents and provisions—probably food, cooking utensils, tools, and maybe seeds. In fact, so total was Lehi's commitment to leave it all behind that later the Lord commanded him to return for the plates of Laban. I don't know how he got hold of the gold he'd given away to get those plates, but somehow he—or his sons—did.

So now let me switch gears and juxtapose this scriptural story with an account of my own journeys into the wilderness. For the past 15 years I have made a summer trip to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in northern Minnesota on the Canadian border. My friends and I travel through the wilderness in canoes, and when we travel from one lake to another, we portage our canoes and belongings over land. An average day includes five to seven such portages, following trails created by French voyageurs who brought in furs to sell at military forts in the 18th century.

For part of our journey we are quite alone, and on rugged routes deep in the wilderness we can travel all day without seeing another person. Each lake is inhabited by a pair of loons, and the birds' dances across the water at sunset are a treasured sight. We occasionally see dangerous wild animals, black bears, and moose, but the worst wilderness threat in Minnesota, as you all know, is the mosquito! I can see some of you are familiar with the mosquitoes in Minnesota.

Preparing for this trip takes time and effort. Each January I plan my trip by buying a permit through an outfitter and gathering some girlfriends and unsuspecting female relatives like

my loyal daughter-in-law to go with me into the wilderness. The next six months I work to stay in good shape and lose those Christmas pounds I gained from eating too much chocolate so that I will be able to carry the 60-pound canoe myself on the portages. It's important to me to pull my weight and do my fair share of the hard work. I study the map, get used to my hiking boots again, and pack my personal gear: a change of clothing, rain gear, swimsuit and towel, reading material, and strong, 100 percent-DEET mosquito repellent. Our outfitter supplies us with canoes, camping gear (like tents and cooking equipment), and dehydrated food. Like Lehi, we know that since we will carry everything ourselves, we want to pack light—but we must also be prepared to travel alone in the wilderness.

Stage 2: The Journey

Let's return to the Book of Mormon to learn about the journey of Lehi's family in the wilderness. When they left their camp by the borders of the Red Sea to move into the unknown, they were given a navigational tool. We read in 1 Nephi 16:

And it came to pass that the voice of the Lord spake unto my father by night, and commanded him that on the morrow he should take his journey into the wilderness.

And it came to pass that as my father arose in the morning, and went forth to the tent door, to his great astonishment he beheld upon the ground a round ball of curious workmanship; and it was of fine brass. And within the ball were two spindles; and the one pointed the way whither we should go into the wilderness. . . .

And it came to pass that we did take our tents and depart into the wilderness, across the river Laman. [1 Nephi 16:9–10, 12]

The “round ball of curious workmanship” led them along the best route, where they hunted wild beasts and found fertile areas

that provided plant food. Nephi observed that the pointers in the ball “did work according to the faith and diligence and heed which we did give unto them” (1 Nephi 16:28). We do not really know the size of the ball, but we can surmise that it was relatively small, since Nephi wrote, “And thus we see that by small means the Lord can bring about great things” (1 Nephi 16:29). It was like a compass, and if they did not heed it with faith and diligence, it would not work for them.

As in any journey, things go wrong. Nephi's steel bow broke, his older brothers became angry with him, and everyone was tired and hungry and began murmuring. Only then did the travelers begin to fully appreciate how the “round ball of curious workmanship” guided them. At first they thought the ball was mainly like a compass, but it turned out to be much more than that. And I read again from the scriptures:

And there was also written upon them [the pointers] a new writing, which was plain to be read, which did give us understanding concerning the ways of the Lord; and it was written and changed from time to time, according to the faith and diligence which we gave unto it. [1 Nephi 16:29]

When they paid close attention to the ball, they could see writing that helped them understand the ways of the Lord. The writing changed according to the degree of attention they gave it and according to the circumstances they faced. Thus the “round ball of curious workmanship” gave them direction not only in the way they should travel but also in how they should live. By providing the “round ball of curious workmanship,” the Lord was able to guide them through the wilderness, but only to the degree that they took heed of the ball's instructions.

I can find parallels to their experiences in my own journeys in the wilderness. Like Lehi's

family, when we go to the Boundary Waters, we go without a guide. We do have a map and a compass, but, like the “round ball,” they are useless unless we actually pay attention to them. Now you might ask yourselves, how could we *not* pay attention? Well, if you put two good friends in a canoe, and they get to talking, or become so absorbed in the lovely scenery that, behold (and it came to pass, we might say), they can be someplace and not know where they are! Not knowing where you are, obviously, is the definition of being lost.

I have had more experiences of being lost in the wilderness than I care to admit, but let me tell you about the most recent one. A few years ago our group of six took a trip up the Magnetic River to the Saganaga Lake. This is one of my favorite routes, and although it was the third time for me, it was the first time for the others. We were on our final day of the trip, and we were running a bit behind. Our stove had caught on fire in the morning (the fuel hose was not placed properly when we cooked our pancakes), so breakfast was delayed, and we had encountered a few rough portages at midday.

So we arrived on the lake late in the afternoon. Those of you who are sailors will know that late afternoon is when the winds come up, and we were paddling westward directly into the wind. It was a tough paddle, and with the wind in our faces, at times it felt like we were paddling in peanut butter. Two very strong paddlers manned one of our four canoes, and as they got out ahead of us, I noticed that they missed the turn.

Now, this is an easy mistake, because as we looked west there were many islands. If they had read the map more closely or had used their compass, they would have known where to go, but for some reason they lost track of where they were. Yelling into the wind at them would have been futile, and they did not look back to see signals we were giving them with

our paddles. (In case you students don’t know, cell phones do not work in the wilderness.)

At that moment I was faced with a dilemma. Should I take the other three canoes the right direction, or should we follow our first canoe off course? What would you do? Because their physical safety was my first concern, I reasoned it was better to be off course together than apart in the right place. We followed them for another half hour before they realized they were lost and pulled over to wait for us. We all pulled up, glad to have a little rest on the island’s mossy bank after an afternoon of paddling into the wind. We gathered around a map, but only after we aligned our intended route on the map with the compass I carried were we able to head off in the proper direction.

But the story does not end here. Because we were wandering in the wilderness for an extra three hours, the campsite we had selected was already taken. It was after seven o’clock and the sun was sinking in the sky when we finally found a less preferable site that was still vacant. Totally exhausted, we disembarked and unloaded our gear, and some set up tents while the others cooked dinner over an open fire. It was eight o’clock when we finally ate our dinner. That night as we lay in our sleeping bags listening to the lullaby of the loons, we were glad to be safe and sound despite our misadventure. It was a hard lesson, but we learned the lesson Lehi’s family learned. Things will go wrong, but if you pay attention to where you are going, use the compass, and stay together, you will complete the journey.

Stage 3: Making Meaning of Our Journey

Like Nephi, I tell you about my journey some time after it has happened. As historians, we know that memories are imperfect and that no two persons remember the same event the same way. What we choose to remember can be more interesting than knowing what really happened. Let’s turn to Alma to understand

how Lehi's descendants made meaning of the great journey to the promised land. First, take note that as modern readers we do not know the name of the "round ball of curious workmanship" until we read Alma's explanation to his son Helaman over 500 years later. In Alma's day, Lehi's descendants were making meaning of the journey. I read from Alma 37:

And now, my son, I have somewhat to say concerning the thing which our fathers call a ball, or director—or our fathers called it Liahona, which is, being interpreted, a compass; and the Lord prepared it. . . .

. . . And behold, it was prepared to show unto our fathers the course which they should travel in the wilderness.

And it did work for them according to their faith in God; therefore, if they had faith to believe that God could cause that those spindles should point the way they should go, behold, it was done. [Alma 37:38–40]

Alma explained to Helaman that the Liahona showed them the course that they should travel in the wilderness and that it worked only if they had enough faith to take a look at it and to follow it. Furthermore, as Alma told Helaman, when

they were slothful, and forgot to exercise their faith and diligence . . . then those marvelous works ceased, and they did not progress in their journey;

Therefore, they tarried in the wilderness, or did not travel a direct course, and were afflicted with hunger and thirst, because of their transgressions. [Alma 37:41–42]

What was their transgression? It was that they didn't exercise faith in the Liahona, didn't look at the guide the Lord had given them, and lost their way.

As I have made meaning of my own journeys through my photo collections and writings, I have derived lessons that I have

only come to understand with the passage of time. Today I realize that Alma's words certainly applied to my friends and to me in our wilderness journey: We were lost because we were "slothful" and forgot to read the map. So we did not travel a direct course, and we had a very tough go of it. Luckily, with the use of a compass we were able to get back on course and safely make it to our destination.

The experiences of our literal journeys in the wilderness can be applied to our journey through life. Alma explained this to Helaman:

And now, my son, I would that ye should understand that these things are not without a shadow; for as our fathers were slothful to give heed to this compass (now these things were temporal) they did not prosper; even so it is with things which are spiritual. [Alma 37:43]

As Alma reminded Helaman, if we do not heed the direction of the Lord, we will not progress in our journey of life. We can easily lose our way and take unplanned and costly detours, and we might not get back on course to our destination. In our journey of life, we do not have the Liahona, but we do have the Lord to guide us if we will pay heed. Alma assured us that it is easy for us to follow the Lord:

For behold, it is as easy to give heed to the word of Christ, which will point to you a straight course to eternal bliss, as it was for our fathers to give heed to this compass, which would point unto them a straight course to the promised land. [Alma 37:44]

We can find the Lord's guidance by reading the scriptures, listening to our latter-day prophets, and heeding the counsel of our Church leaders and those who love us. In our recent general conference, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf addressed this subject. At times we may wander away from the gospel and away from gospel principles, and we may feel unworthy to be found. He said:

*Though we are incomplete, God loves us completely.
Though we are imperfect, He loves us perfectly.
Though we may feel lost and without compass,
God's love encompasses us completely. ["The Love
of God," *Ensign*, November 2009, 22]*

By living worthily and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we will have a successful journey in the unknown wilderness of our future. As Alma clearly stated:

*And now I say, is there not a type in this thing?
For just as surely as this director did bring our
fathers, by following its course, to the promised
land, shall the words of Christ, if we follow their
course, carry us beyond this vale of sorrow into a far
better land of promise. [Alma 37:45]*

I will close by referring back to my own experience. When I return from my journey in the wilderness each year, the first thing I do, even before I get cleaned up, is call my husband on the telephone. I tell him: "I am back. I am safe. I love you." I can only imagine that it must be like that when we return to our Heavenly Father. After our life's journey, we will be reunited with Him and our loved ones, and we can say: "I am back. I am safe. I love you." It is my hope that we will give heed to the word of Christ to carry us beyond this "vale of sorrow" to live with Him again. I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.