

Failure and Success

CECIL O. SAMUELSON

It is always an exciting and satisfying opportunity to greet you at the beginning of a new semester. In my long experience of school beginnings, I have concluded that while all are positive in the sense that there has been yet little time for anything serious to go wrong, each new term is different in some ways from any other. This fall at BYU, for example, we have fewer first-year young men and fewer second-year young women as a result of the change in missionary ages announced by President Thomas S. Monson last October. I don't know what next year will bring, but in two years we will have more returned missionaries than ever before just starting their BYU careers.

To all of you I add my welcome and express my appreciation that you are here, whether for the first time or continuing your educational quests. And for those of you back from missionary or military service, a special greeting is in order. Likewise, we appreciate our nontraditional and bachelor of general studies students being with us.

This past July, on the way to a family excursion with my siblings and their spouses, Sharon and I arrived at Heathrow Airport in London, England, the morning after Andy Murray, a native Scotsman and British hero,

won the Wimbledon tennis tournament. This major event in international professional tennis had not been won by a Brit in seventy-seven years before Murray's exciting victory. The UK media were filled with accounts of his dramatic win, and there seemed to be a national celebration over the outcome of this tennis match. Prime Minister David Cameron said he thought Andy should be knighted, although Murray himself reported he didn't think that was necessarily merited. His picture was on the front page of every newspaper, and, I am told, his success was the lead story on television for a few days.

This national pride is perhaps understandable and maybe even laudatory. What I found interesting was that there was little, if any, mention made of his serving faults, unforced errors, or games lost or any of the particularly excellent points scored by his opponent. The entire story would seem, if you didn't look at the match statistics closely, like a perfectly executed victory that was never in doubt.

Cecil O. Samuelson was president of Brigham Young University when this devotional address was delivered on 10 September 2013.

The thought occurred to me that perhaps winning Wimbledon or another sporting contest is more like successfully completing the game of life or our BYU education than any of us might really expect. What I mean by this is that I believe the plan of salvation makes it possible for all of us—when we have tried to live our lives the best we can and have worked to overcome our mistakes and repent of our sins—to come to the Final Judgment or graduation and have the wonderful pronouncement made to us of “well done, thou good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21).

You might be thinking, “What has this to do with my work and study here at BYU?” That is a very good question. Because of my own experience and also because of my knowledge of your remarkable skills and abilities, I know that many, if not all, of you will meet with some things in the semesters and years ahead that you have not yet encountered in your academic lives. That is, you are now at a very serious university, surrounded by extremely capable classmates and a faculty that has unquestionably high expectations for your performance. What has served you well previously will not likely be sufficient to allow you to breeze through your course work without lots of hard work and also some possible disappointment and difficulty.

For some this leads to anxiety, depression, and questions about self-worth or worthiness to be here and a host of other negative or unproductive thought patterns. This is understandable but not helpful or true. We want you to do your best, be the best you can be, and aspire to perfection, but we also want you to be realistic about the circumstances in which you find yourselves. Personal growth comes from being stretched, and you will likely find yourselves challenged in ways you have never previously experienced or expected.

We are not in favor of slothfulness or laziness, but we also hope to help you guard against the all-too-common problem of

perfectionism or being unrealistically hard on yourselves. To return to sports analogies, it is important to remember that even Jimmer Fredette and Tyler Haws occasionally miss a shot in otherwise wonderful basketball game performances. Before long it will be World Series time in baseball, and those of you who follow that sport understand that any player who can get a base hit three times in every ten at-bat opportunities is likely to be a hero even though he has made seven outs along the way. Even in a perfect baseball game the pitcher will throw a few balls in addition to lots of strikes. You can think of other examples that hopefully will enlighten and encourage you.

As I was kindly introduced this morning, mention was made of my career in medicine. My study of medicine in medical school and then in my internship, residency, and postdoctoral fellowship was very long and demanding, but it wasn’t nearly as traumatic for me as was the process of trying to qualify for admission to medical school. In medical schools there is an honor society named Alpha Omega Alpha or AOA. For many of us—and this began early as undergraduates—AOA really stood for Always Overly Anxious.

Those of you who are contemplating entering competitive graduate programs will perhaps understand the thinking—often negative and distracting—that can occur when a student aspires to such a goal. One of the things that contributed for me and perhaps for others was unofficial communication that existed, apart from the assurances of advisors and faculty, among students, even at BYU, about what was really required to be admitted to the program or institution you hoped to enter.

In my undergraduate days and among the cohort of premedical students with whom I was studying was the sure conviction that one particular course in the array of required premedical classes was the key to being admitted or rejected. Put simply, if you got an A you got in. If you didn’t, then too bad.

My time to take this class came, and I did what I thought was my very best work. I wasn't failing by any means, but on every examination, which occurred every couple of weeks, there were two or three questions or problems that I had neither anticipated nor studied for. The specifics were not found in my notes nor in the assigned reading, and, as a result, my scores were not what I felt I needed. Several of my classmates earned higher scores on these tests, and therefore I began to seriously doubt my own abilities. I determined to work harder, but all that increased was my AOA (always overly anxious) quotient and not my test performance. Needless to say, I did not get an A in the class. I was crestfallen and quite sure I would need to change my career plans, even though my performance in all my other courses was acceptable.

It was only sometime later that I learned that some of the people who performed better than I did in this particular class had copies of old examinations (I don't know how they obtained them, and I still don't) and that the professor tended to recycle his exams rather than create new ones. I discussed the matter with a trusted advisor who told me not to worry because I would be judged on my "body of work" and not just on one class. Only several years later when I became the dean of admissions at the medical school did I learn that what was rumored about the essentiality of this class—and we as students were sure it was absolutely true—was in fact false. The admissions committee knew about the course, the professor, and even the old examinations, and so rather than giving this course extra weight, performance in it tended to be discounted, particularly if achievement in other key courses was not also excellent.

While I may not have ever gotten completely over being AOA, I feel that the needlessly wasted, sleepless nights hindered rather than helped my academic performance. I am grateful that we have wonderful advisors and the

counseling center here at BYU to help students who may have similar concerns or worries. Don't be afraid to ask for help, advice, and counsel. Remember that learning to deal with these issues is an important part of the educational maturation process. This is true for you and for me and has always been true for others.

Some of my favorite heroes, likely to be shared with many of you, have had major failures and disappointments in their lives to go with the great successes for which they are most likely to be remembered. Winston Churchill lost about as many elections as he won. We know, and give him credit for, his absolute determination during World War II. Among the things I have found most helpful is this statement attributed to him: "Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts."

Successful students are those who have realistic but dogged determination to work through whatever challenges or difficulties face them.

Abraham Lincoln was visionary and courageous. We don't dwell much on his far-from-perfect course to the White House, but he was the man for his time to preserve the nation and help us begin to overcome our troubled past. Although he was elected president, earlier he had lost elections to the state general assembly (or legislature) and also a campaign for the U.S. Senate.

George Washington, in my view, deserves all the credit he has received as the father of this country, but he also had his flaws and disappointments. As a general, he lost several key battles. He also owned slaves throughout his life, and although torn by his mixed feelings about that unfortunate and barbaric tradition, he never fully renounced it.

Some, including perhaps those who recognize their own failings and imperfections, have found it easy to find fault with Church leaders both current and in the past. Happily,

we do not have a doctrine that anyone, including prophets and high Church leaders, is perfect. In fact, we understand that there has been only One, the Lord Jesus Christ, who made it through mortality without mistake, sin, or blemish. I will say more about that as I conclude in a few minutes.

We occasionally find among us those who feel their faith has been threatened by the alleged mistake or misstatement of a priesthood leader. The Prophet Joseph Smith was very clear in acknowledging his foibles or imperfections. He shared this account of his own teenage years:

I was left to all kinds of temptations; and, mingling with all kinds of society, I frequently fell into many foolish errors, and displayed the weakness of youth, and the foibles of human nature; which, I am sorry to say, led me into divers temptations, offensive in the sight of God. In making this confession, no one need suppose me guilty of any great or malignant sins. A disposition to commit such was never in my nature. But I was guilty of levity, and sometimes associated with jovial company, etc., not consistent with that character which ought to be maintained by one who was called of God as I had been. But this will not seem very strange to any one who recollects my youth, and is acquainted with my native cheery temperament.

In consequence of these things, I often felt condemned for my weakness and imperfections. [JS—H 1:28–29; emphasis added]

For me, I find encouragement that Joseph felt terrible about his weaknesses and imperfections. If he had been a medical student, perhaps he would have been an ideal candidate for AOA!

Another mistake young Joseph Smith made is not only well known but documented in the Doctrine and Covenants. I speak of his sharing with Martin Harris the 116 pages of the translation of the Book of Mormon that were subsequently lost. Joseph lost his power to

translate for a season, but, after proper repentance, his gift to translate was restored. Think of this counsel a loving Lord gave to Joseph after this unfortunate event. This principle also applies to every one of us in our own individual struggles and efforts: “Do not run faster or labor more than you have strength and means provided . . . ; but be diligent unto the end” (D&C 10:4).

And the companion scripture is found in the advice King Benjamin gave his people in his benedictory address after directly calling them to repentance and to live more faithful lives:

And see that all these things are done in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength. And again, it is expedient that he should be diligent, that thereby he might win the prize; therefore, all things must be done in order. [Mosiah 4:27]

This was good advice those many years ago, and it is excellent advice for all at BYU today. We need to do our best, but we also need to recognize that we have some natural limits placed on our abilities so that we might grow by stretching but not breaking our capacities.

We would have none of this great counsel without the Prophet Joseph Smith. Nevertheless, we must remember that this great man and prophet was not completely immune from error in a few matters of lesser importance. He put it this way himself: “I never told you I was perfect; but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught” (HC 6:366).

In 1842 Joseph recorded an experience he had with a group of Saints:

I told them I was but a man, and they must not expect me to be perfect; if they expected perfection from me, I should expect it from them; but if they would bear with my infirmities and the infirmities of the brethren, I would likewise bear with their infirmities. [HC 5:181]

We all have infirmities or weaknesses, inconsistencies, and failings. We need to learn to bear with our own and also with those of others. We should not, as some people seem to do, have higher standards for others than we do for ourselves, but we also should not have unrealistically high expectations for ourselves. If we do, we are in effect failing to recognize not only the blessing but also the essentiality of the Savior's Atonement in the Father's plan for each of us.

Remember these words of Alma to the people of Gideon as he described the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ:

And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.

And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his

bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.
[Alma 7:11–12]

Our pains and infirmities include much more than our sins and illnesses. They include our mistakes, our failures, and our disappointments. These we must have to gain essential experiences, but we also need to understand that we can find in the Savior's sacrifice for us every compensation and help we require to overcome all that vexes or frustrates us when we have done our part, which includes our best efforts.

May God bless us in our struggles with the knowledge that the Father and the Son are there for us and will bless us in our studies, in our personal lives, and in our efforts to become more like Them, because They do live and Their promises are real for each of us. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.