

Seeking for Solutions

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Brothers and sisters and friends, I am grateful for this opportunity to be here with you. When I visited this campus on another occasion, about 20 years ago, I could not find as good of a parking place as I was given today. I came for Women's Conference with a car full of friends. After a very inspiring and fulfilling day, I went for the car, thinking I would save the other women the long walk through the parking lot. Imagine how shocked I was when I found my car rendered immobile by a huge contraption on the front wheel. I later learned that the students affectionately called this contraption the "boot." Our son, a BYU student body officer at the time, had borrowed my car earlier in the semester while his car was being repaired. Unbeknownst to me, in the rush to meet his many obligations on campus, he had parked somewhere he should not have and received a ticket that he had forgotten to pay. I got the boot that day. So believe me, today as I speak with you about seeking solutions to problems, sometimes not even of our own making, I know something about which I speak.

And I know you do, too. We each have our burdens to bear. No matter who we are, what we do, or where we go, each one of us will have difficulties. Problems are part of mortality. But when solved with wisdom and in

accordance with gospel principles, those very problems can be gateways to eternity. As we walk the path of righteousness and turn to the Lord, we come to know the power of God that is within each one of us.

I want to commend you for how well you are already doing. Your wise decisions and hard work have brought you to Brigham Young University.

You do so well with such full schedules and heavy loads. I know something of the sacrifices you make to acquire a first-rate education, and I marvel at your strength and abilities. I admire the faithfulness with which you serve in your Church callings. I cheer for you when you put first things first. I have no doubt that you are youth of a noble birthright and that you can live up to the challenges you meet.

My personal experience has taught me that as you study and prepare to "go forth to serve," the most important skill you need to acquire is the ability to solve problems.

Mary Ellen Smoot was the general Relief Society - president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 14 November 2000.

Individually and as a people, we will make greater progress and do so more joyfully if we focus on solutions rather than problems—whatever the problems may be.

Today I would like to share four gems of motherly advice regarding problem solving. If at first this counsel seems contrary to your way of thinking, I pray that you will keep an open mind, study it out, and put it to the test—always remembering that “there is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated” (D&C 130: 20).

My first bit of counsel is to stop and consider where you are headed. When faced with a problem, search your soul to see if your present thoughts and actions are leading to a solution, feeding the problem, or possibly even creating more problems for you. You have probably heard the old adage that when you see you are digging yourself into a hole—stop digging! Seek for perspective greater than your own and take an outsider’s look at the situation. In Proverbs we are taught that only “fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7).

Let me illustrate. When I was about 12 years old, my girlfriend and I were in her barn saddling a horse for a joyride. Suddenly her family’s goose and gander came through the barn door honking and flapping their wings. They were headed right for me, so I started backing away. The geese became even more excited and started pecking at me fiercely. The further I inched away, the madder they got. Mercifully, my friend yelled over the racket, “You are backing into their nest.” If I had only known that a few moments sooner, I could have walked toward them—away from the problem—and my legs would not have been so black and blue.

I learned an important lesson that day about going in the right direction—and about valuing another’s viewpoint. Sometimes we become convinced that our perceptions are correct, that we are doing all that we can do, or that if we

simply run faster or longer our problems will be solved. But nothing will get better if we are going the wrong way. I have discovered a valuable exercise. Occasionally I take a good look at my life, my daily habits, my thoughts, and certainly my actions. Then I ask myself: “Am I headed in the right direction? Will my actions *today* lead to greater peace and happiness tomorrow?” I must be humble enough to realize that I may need to change direction.

Just a few weeks ago, at general conference, Elder Richard G. Scott taught that repentance is an essential element of the gospel—for all of us. “Repentance is not optional” (Richard G. Scott, “The Path to Peace and Joy,” *Ensign*, November 2000, 25). It is part of walking the paths of righteousness. If ever our performance does not adhere to correct and eternal principles, if the path we are traveling is pulling us away from eternal goals, we must make a course correction.

So often we hear people complaining about what a wicked world we live in. They say it is simply too hard to be virtuous. “Everyone is doing it,” they rationalize. I see all of the temptations you face. I agree, armies of filth do surround us. We do not need to be their victims. We can each decide for ourselves ways to safeguard our virtue—ways to keep us going in the right direction. There is no sin that is worth the price you have to pay for it. Determine right now to put on the whole armor of God and neither retreat into iniquity nor surrender to vice. In our world today, what are you and I going to do to stay clean?

You think about what you can do, and while you are thinking, I will offer a few suggestions. First, dress modestly and neatly. How we adorn ourselves has so much to do with how we think and feel, and how we make others think and feel in our presence. President Harold B. Lee taught:

Do not underestimate the important symbolic and actual effect of appearance. Persons who are well groomed and modestly dressed invite the

companionship of the Spirit of our Father in Heaven and are able to exercise a wholesome influence upon those around them. Persons who are unkempt and careless about their appearance, or adopt the visual symbols of those who often oppose our ideals, expose themselves and persons around them to influences that are degrading and dissonant. Outward appearance is often a reflection of inward tendencies. [Teachings of Harold B. Lee (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 220]

We can ask ourselves, “Does the way I dress encourage others to think good, righteous thoughts or base, ignoble thoughts?” Consider how we would feel if we were to meet the Savior today. Would He be pleased with how we have chosen to adorn our body? Let us be willing to take a righteous stand and look like it, too!

For women and men alike, modesty is a building block of virtue. Why? Because our bodies are sacred gifts from God that actually give us power over Satan. Satan never has had nor ever will have a body, and he would like nothing more than to have us underestimate this gift. When we wear clothing that is unseemly or too tight, that exposes or otherwise belittles the sacredness of our bodies, we play with fire. And sometimes the scars of even a small burn mar our souls for a long, long time. Back away from the fire and head in the right direction.

Can you imagine what could happen in this casual world if *all* our students made a determination to represent the Lord—and to look like it, too! I wonder if you realize how many world leaders visit this university and look to it as an example.

Let me suggest another safeguard of virtue that will help you to head in the right direction. Be reverent. Especially during sacrament meetings, remember the purpose for which you are there. Listen to the truths being taught. You will be blessed as you go seeking to find solutions to your problems. The sacrament is a time to examine our lives over the past week, ask for forgiveness, and recommit. It is not a time

for back rubs, whisperings about last night’s party, or speculations about next week’s dance. During the sacrament and throughout the week, let reverence lead to repentance.

The Savior has made it possible for us to become clean from sin and return to our Father in Heaven. In his conference talk, Elder Scott reflected, “It must pain Him deeply to see the pointless agony both in this life and beyond the veil that accompany the unrepentant sinner after all He did so that we need not suffer” (“The Path,” 26). My dear brothers and sisters, if you have not yet felt the cleansing power of the Atonement, do not delay. Do not let yourself get any more bumped or bruised. Yield a broken heart and a contrite spirit. Change directions, if need be. Face the problem and with sincere sorrow and true humility submit to the Lord. He is all-knowing and perfectly loving. He simply could not lead us astray. His promise is sure: “Draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you; seek me diligently and ye shall find me; ask, and ye shall receive” (D&C 88:63).

All of which leads to my second suggestion for solving problems. When faced with a problem, humbly ask the question “What am I going to do about it?”

From His prophets on down, the Lord has empowered His servants to come unto Him, to repent, and to seek for solutions. Not alone, but with God’s inspiration and support, prophets have had to solve enormous problems. Think of Nephi with his broken bow. Think of the brother of Jared with his dark boats. Think of Moroni in the heat of battle. Any and every leader has had to “study it out” (D&C 9:8), humbly present a solution to the Lord, and then faithfully act upon it as guided by the Spirit. The Lord perfectly sustains, but He does not solve problems for us. Surely He could have given Nephi a new bow. He could have just commanded the brother of Jared to bring Him some rocks. He could have won all of Moroni’s battles for him. But higher laws were at stake. Learning and growing had to take place.

This process is vital to our spiritual growth and cannot take place as long as we look to other people, circumstances, programs, or institutions to solve problems for us. President Brigham Young taught: “Instead of searching after what the Lord is going to do for us, let us inquire what we can do for ourselves” (*JD* 9:172). Then we can take it to the Lord for confirmation.

Let me illustrate with a story that a friend and faculty member at this university shared with me. Several years ago a student came to his office. She was distraught. Tears ran down her face as she outlined her situation. She had not done as well as she thought she would in some of her classes, and if she did not get a high enough grade in his class, she would be deported to her country of origin. She felt as if her whole future rested upon his decision.

With that preface, she pleaded, “What are you going to give me?”

The professor was warm and compassionate, but forthright. “What have you earned?” he responded.

Together they went through the ledger. They tallied her points, even added in some extra credit she had not yet completed, and determined that her scores were far, far below the university’s standard. The professor felt that it would not be fair to other students who had studied, sacrificed, and rightfully earned their grades to raise her mark as high as it would need to go. He counseled with her. They agonized over the situation together. In the end, the professor was sincere and kind, but fair. He could not give her what she had not earned but desperately wanted.

Needless to say, she was quite upset. She had to leave BYU. Upon returning home, she enrolled in a community college. She studied and worked hard. Over the course of time she became committed to academic achievement. She began to recognize the Lord’s hand in her life. She served a mission. Two and a half years later, she returned to BYU a different person. Ready to shoulder the responsibility of her

own actions, she had become a conscientious student and a better person. A little more humble and a lot more mature, she looked up her former professor and thanked him for being firm. With love and respect he had invited her to do some soul-searching, and maybe for the first time in her life when confronted with a problem, she had really asked herself the question “What am I going to do about this?” And that made all the difference.

My dear friends, I invite you to do the same about whatever may be troubling you at this time. Be prayerful. Be responsible when facing a dilemma. Ask yourself, “What am I going to do about this?” You could have the same kind of dialogue with the Lord that the student had with her teacher.

I realize that many of your challenges may not be of your own making. You may have inherent disadvantages; you may have been treated badly; you may have been wronged. You may have someone who caused you to get the “boot.” But no matter what your problem, you can take charge of your life and go forward with faith. You may not be able to change other people—most likely you will not. You may not be able to change everything about your circumstances, but the power is in you to determine how you will respond and what kind of a person you will be.

Some young men in one of the dorms shared how they worked together to solve a problem. They had been having some friction in their group. Although no one had been blatantly unkind, a competitive feeling was pushing these friends apart and making them dwell on their inadequacies. So one night the young men decided to take some positive steps. They determined to have family prayer in their apartment each morning and read a few verses in the scriptures together. They set goals to sincerely encourage and support each other. Simple though this remedy may sound, it made all the difference. One kind word led to another. One thoughtful act invited another in

return. It did not take long before the situation had turned around and their apartment became a warm and inviting place again. These young men were willing to ask, "What am I going to do about this?" And the Lord blessed them with a solution to their problem.

Even as I encourage such self-reliance, I want to make something clear. True self-reliance implies a humble dependence upon deity. In last month's general Relief Society meeting, President Gordon B. Hinckley reminded us:

None of us is wise enough to make it on our own. We need the help, the wisdom, the guidance of the Almighty in reaching those decisions that are so tremendously important in our lives. There is no substitute for prayer. There is no greater resource. ["Your Greatest Challenge, Mother," Ensign, November 2000, 99]

So be prayerful as you evaluate yourself and your circumstances. Humble and sincere consideration of the question "What am I going to do about it?" could be an incredible turning point for you. When we sincerely and submissively search our hearts, we come to know what the Lord would have us do about the challenges we face.

My third point is know that the organizations of the Church can help prepare and strengthen us in our problem solving. We have been told that the Church will never be larger than our ward boundaries. Each of us has an opportunity to be an instrument in the Lord's hands in making our ward strong and filled with so much love, devotion, and acceptance that everyone feels a part of our ward.

The organizations of the Church are set up to teach us how to come to Christ. The priesthood is given to all worthy men, and Relief Society is the Lord's organization for women. It does not matter what position we hold, we can emanate love and support for our leaders. We need the older sisters and their experience, we

need the younger sisters with their zest for life, we need those who have suffered through divorce and health problems, and we need those who have not yet married but are very capable and willing to serve. We need each other. We need visiting teachers and home teachers who are sincerely interested in those they visit and realize the importance of their calling as they strive to reach the one.

When we attend our meetings for priesthood and Relief Society, we are there to assist the teacher or leader. We attend to find out who needs our help and what we can do to further the work of the Lord.

As you are looking for a lifelong companion, choose someone who will be willing to support you in your Church callings. It is through these callings that we become better people. Each of us should look forward to the blessings that come from Church assignments given to our spouse as well as to ourself. As couples work together, leadership skills are developed.

My fourth point is be an influence for good on others. At school, church, and with friends and family, extend a loving hand of service. It is not enough for us to simply attend our meetings and fulfill Church callings. It is not enough to just "get by." Of all people, we should approach this mortality as a great and grand adventure and fill it with all the wonder, love, and meaning that we anticipated before we came here.

Imagine a situation in which your great dream in life was to travel to a foreign country, but when you arrived, all you did was sit listlessly in your hotel room—filled with worry, fear, desperation, and sadness about the opportunities awaiting you. Similarly, we are all here in this most marvelous and wonderful of worlds, living this magnificent adventure called mortality. Can we afford to spend our lives brooding, being bored, or being bothered?

Blessed with the eternal perspective the gospel gives, we will rise to the full measure of our abilities to bless and serve those around us

and thereby experience a full measure of joy. We are in this together. When we return to the loving arms of our Heavenly Father, how many of our brothers and sisters and loved ones will we bring with us?

The spirit of service of which I speak as a means of overcoming our own problems has been ignited in the Relief Society organization. Relief Societies all over the world have reached out to their communities and are serving in the name of the Relief Society organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Priesthood leaders have witnessed firsthand the joy and testimony that develop from service and have made service projects both family and ward activities. Less-active members have returned to full activity, and new members have been brought into the fold through service.

President Hinckley has urged us to help increase the number of converts. We now have more than 11 million members of the Church. What are we doing to retain and strengthen each member? What can we do to share the gospel with others? The Lord needs each of us to reach out and touch the hearts of those around us. No one is exempt. President Hinckley does it, and so can we!

Not long ago I started praying for a missionary experience. Along with everything I have to pray for, I have added that sentence to every prayer, and *I promise you* our Father in Heaven answers this prayer—sometimes so quickly you are in awe. Try it! It will strengthen you and help you to realize you are on His errand and angels are there to assist you. Missionary work is revitalizing and energizing. Involvement in it helps us overlook our own concerns.

Recently a devoted wife and mother of nine children had a faith-promoting experience. Now, if she has time to be a missionary, we all do! A few years ago, this sister and her family hosted three young boys with the Phoenix Boys Choir during their stay in Salt

Lake City. She gave each of them a Book of Mormon with her testimony and her family picture. John, one of the choir boys, for whatever reason, left his copy of the Book of Mormon on the bus when he returned home.

A businessman who happened to be named John found the book. For quite some time the book shifted around to several locations in his office. One day John opened the book and noticed someone had written a note inside the front of it. The note began, “Dear John.” Since his name is John, he read the note.

In the meantime, Laurie, a co-worker, and a less-active member of the Church, developed a strong friendship with John. They started dating.

Laurie and John had some very meaningful talks about religion. Faced with some heartfelt questions, John turned to that persistent copy of the Book of Mormon and read some passages. He started going to church with Laurie.

You know the rest of the story. After they had been married about nine months, the sister missionaries knocked on their door, and John started taking the discussions. John was baptized and confirmed a member of the Church. John looked up the family whose picture was in his Book of Mormon.

Just before Christmas John called and explained how instrumental this sister and her family had been in his conversion. Needless to say, this faithful family was so excited to hear from John. They invited him to their home and continued to love and fellowship him. Just last month they accompanied John and his wife, Laurie, as they were sealed in the Salt Lake Temple.

Brothers and sisters, we have the truth, and someday we will have many regrets if we do not share what we have. Let us reach inside ourselves and give our best away. Whenever we truly give of ourselves, we forget about our own problems and garner newfound strength.

Right now you may be facing a lot more than a parking “boot.” You may be backed into a corner and feel there is no way out, but

I promise you that if you will use these steps, you will find solutions to your challenges.

As you leave here today, would you think of the four bits of counsel I have given you regarding problem solving?

1. Stop and consider where you are headed.
2. Ask the question "What am I going to do about it?"
3. Know that the organizations of the Church can help prepare and strengthen us in our problem solving.
4. Be an influence for good on others.

Our Father in Heaven knows our potential, and if we will make Him a part of our daily lives, if we humbly and sincerely strive to do His will, we will be blessed with solutions. Nevertheless, even in all our efforts to solve problems correctly, even then we may have

moments of wondering if God is mindful of us. In D&C 6:20 it says, "Therefore treasure up these words in thy heart. Be faithful and diligent in keeping the commandments of God, and I will encircle thee in the arms of my love."

Brothers and sisters, in the most personal way, let me assure you that He is mindful of you. He knows you. He loves you. He wants you to succeed. Our Savior made problem solving possible. No problem is so big or so small that He cannot or will not help us solve it. So to all who seek for solutions, I lovingly invite: Seek Him. Come unto Him.

He will be there for us. He will guide us in our search for solutions to the challenges we meet every day of our lives. This is my testimony to you in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.