

# *Our Eternal Education*

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**I**t is a humbling experience to be asked to speak at a devotional, but I am happy to be with you today to share my testimony of the gospel.

I love being a teacher. I see myself as a teacher in every aspect of my life—in my work, with my family, and in my Church calling.

When I teach I like to ask questions to begin a discussion with my students. So standing in front of you as a speaker—as a lecturer—is uncomfortable for me. As I speak to you today I will ask you to think about what I am saying. You may not be able to answer me the way you would in a classroom, but you should be able to form answers in your mind—and in your heart. I hope this will help you feel the Spirit and use what I will talk about in your personal development.

## **Our Eternal Education**

My first teaching assignment at BYU was a class for students in the secondary mathematics education major. The class was titled “Exploration of Teaching.” On the first day of class I had a discussion with my students about how they viewed teaching and learning through the lens of several metaphors. Today I would like to share with you some of our discussion. I want to look at how each of

these metaphors might help us understand the eternal education we have come here on earth to receive.

Our eternal education begins with an understanding of where we have come from, why we are here, and where we are going after this life. In many ways these are the same questions we address as educators. We want to know about our students: we want to know where they are from, what their background is, what their home life was like, what cultural experiences they’ve had—anything we can draw from to help us teach them in a language and with examples they will understand. We want to instill in them a vision of where they are going, encourage them to set goals for themselves, and help them to attain those goals.

Today I ask you to think about the purpose of your life here on earth. When asked why you are here, you might say, “To receive a body,” “To learn how to keep the commandments,” or “To become like Christ.”

Elder Dallin H. Oaks wrote:

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*Nancy Wentworth was chair of the BYU Department of Teacher Education when this devotional address was given on 27 November 2012.*

*We are all children of a Heavenly Father who has sent us to earth with the invitation to prepare for eternal life. Every choice, every experience, every repentance and reformation, prepares us for what is to come. [Life's Lessons Learned: Personal Reflections (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 52]*

President Thomas S. Monson has told us:

*Clearly, one primary purpose of our existence upon the earth is to obtain a body of flesh and bones. We have also been given the gift of agency. In a thousand ways we are privileged to choose for ourselves. Here we learn from the hard taskmaster of experience. We discern between good and evil. We differentiate as to the bitter and the sweet. We discover that there are consequences attached to our actions. ["The Race of Life," *Ensign*, May 2012, 91–92]*

Today I hope I can help you see how we use our gift of agency, how we learn from experience, and how we prepare for eternal life by becoming disciples of Christ.

That first day of class I asked my students to think with me about different ways to view education and about how those views might impact how they think about teaching and learning. I had the students get into groups, and I assigned each group a particular metaphor to use as a tool for thinking about education. One group discussed education as a race, another group was assigned to think about education as a garden, and the last group was asked to use family as their metaphor.

### **Education as a Race**

When I asked my students to think about a race as a metaphor for education, they began the discussion with the notion of competition. Competition—is that a positive or a negative thing in education? Some students mentioned that an athlete is willing to win at all costs. What about the idea of growth as an athlete? How does that happen? What is the role of the coach? What is the role of the athlete?

During the summer Olympics this year, a colleague said to me, “Why are we so glued to each event—even when we really don’t know anything about that event or anyone competing in it?” Perhaps the reason is that we love to see people truly excel at something.

Some competitors were so sad to receive a silver medal. They wanted the gold. It was an all-or-nothing proposition for them. For some competitors success has been easy; they have continually been told how good they are and that they are the best. Others were thrilled that they achieved their personal best time at the games. They were improving and getting better with each race or competition.

In the classroom there are some students who feel they can never be the best student in the class—the winner—so why should they continue to work? They might think, “If I can’t be number one, then there is no point in trying at all.”

As teachers we try to encourage growth in our students, not just winning. Is the student or athlete trying to improve his own learning and understanding or is he only trying to beat someone else? We want students to feel that their personal improvement is a victory and that working hard is the way to improve.

In our eternal education we should remember that we are not in competition with others. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland has spoken about how the success of others does not diminish our efforts. He stated:

*Brothers and sisters, there are going to be times in our lives when someone else gets an unexpected blessing or receives some special recognition. May I plead with us not to be hurt—and certainly not to feel envious—when good fortune comes to another person? We are not diminished when someone else is added upon. We are not in a race against each other to see who is the wealthiest or the most talented or the most beautiful or even the most blessed. The race we are **really** in is the race against sin, and surely envy is one of the most universal of*

those. [“The Laborers in the Vineyard,” *Ensign*, May 2012, 31; emphasis in original]

From a spiritual perspective, are we in a race for eternal life? Elder Neil L. Andersen addressed this issue in his April 2012 conference talk:

*Jesus’s call “Come, follow me” (Luke 18:22) is not only for those prepared to compete in a spiritual Olympics. In fact, discipleship is not a competition at all but an invitation to all. Our journey of discipleship is not a dash around the track, nor is it fully comparable to a lengthy marathon. In truth, it is a lifelong migration toward a more celestial world. . . .*

*Wherever you now find yourself on the road of discipleship, you are on the right road, the road toward eternal life. Together we can lift and strengthen one another in the great and important days ahead. [“What Thinks Christ of Me?” *Ensign*, May 2012, 112]*

One more area of importance for me in the race metaphor is the role of the coach and the role of the athlete. The athletes at the Olympics were grateful to their coaches, who recognized their abilities, helped them know which race would best suit their natural talents, helped them improve, advised them about a strength that needed to be built, and encouraged them as they repeated a skill until their performance and their time improved.

I asked my education students if they had ever had a really good coach. If so, how did that coach help them improve? My students talked about how a coach helped them see what they needed to do to improve. A coach saw that to get off the blocks faster, a runner needed to strengthen a particular muscle. The coach gave the runner an assignment to spend time in the weight room to strengthen that muscle.

My students also talked about how they were the ones who needed to do the work.

It is one thing to have a great coach who can see just what an athlete needs to do, but if the athlete does not follow the coach’s guidance, then the muscle does not get stronger. And so it is in the classroom. The teacher can help the student know what he needs to do to improve his skill in reading or mathematics, but if the student does not do the work, then there is not much improvement.

How does this apply to our eternal education?

The scriptures are replete with stories of “coaches” who have advised and guided and taught others how they might better their performance as they strive to become disciples of Christ.

In Alma 39–42 we learn about the way Alma coached his son Corianton about the plan of salvation, about his current abilities and practices, and about what he needed to do to succeed in this life.

In chapter 39 Alma pointed out to Corianton the concerns he had with his performance:

*Now my son, I would that ye should repent and forsake your sins, and go no more after the lusts of your eyes, but cross yourself in all these things; for except ye do this ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God. Oh, remember, and take it upon you, and cross yourself in these things. [Alma 39:9]*

Alma then helped Corianton see what he needed to do next to improve:

*And I command you to take it upon you to counsel with your elder brothers in your undertakings; for behold, thou art in thy youth, and ye stand in need to be nourished by your brothers. And give heed to their counsel. [Alma 39:10]*

In verses 11 and 12 Alma reminded Corianton that he had sinned and that he needed to turn away from that activity.

In verse 13 Alma was very direct with Corianton when he told him:

*Turn to the Lord with all your mind, might, and strength; that ye lead away the hearts of no more to do wickedly; but rather return unto them, and acknowledge your faults and that wrong which ye have done. [Alma 39:13]*

Alma seems to have understood the role of a coach. He provided clear instructions to Corianton about what he needed to do, and he encouraged him to follow those instructions. Alma knew that he could not change Corianton, but he also knew that Corianton could change by following his direction. Corianton had to exercise his agency and do the work to change his behavior.

I wish I could hear from all of you now. Are you thinking about a person you have coached or someone who has coached you? Are you thinking about a time when you did the hard work a coach told you to do so that you could improve your skills? Has this idea helped you in your eternal education? Have you been instructed about what you need to do to become a disciple of Christ?

We can learn from the story of Alma and Corianton, whether we are thinking of ourselves as the coach or as the athlete. As a coach/teacher we need to be kind and loving and supportive of the person we are trying to help. As the athlete/student we are responsible for doing the work that will help us become eternal disciples of Christ. We need to be listening to those coaches in our lives who can help us develop spiritually. These people may be our bishops, home teachers, visiting teachers, family members, or friends. We need to listen to their counsel and then exercise our agency by doing the work they know will help us grow spiritually.

### **Education as a Garden**

How do we grow spiritually? What does that mean to us? Perhaps we can learn about that from the garden metaphor.

My students enjoyed discussing their views of education through the lens of the garden. They described the role of the teacher to be like that of the gardener who creates an environment in which children can learn, in which each student can grow into his or her full potential, whether that is an apple or a pumpkin—a scientist, an artist. It is the responsibility of the gardener to create an environment in which the seed can grow and in which students can thrive and develop.

I asked my students to think about what the role of the student is in this garden metaphor. We can learn a great deal about the role of the student when we read the parable of the sower in Matthew:

*And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow;*

*And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up:*

*Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth:*

*And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.*

*And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them:*

*But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. [Matthew 13:3–8]*

When thinking about your eternal education to become a disciple of Christ, how have you prepared yourself to receive the gospel and to grow in your potential during this lifetime? Are you ignoring the gospel and not accepting the seeds, letting the fowls devour them? Are you the stony soil on which the gospel message falls but in which the roots of the gospel do not grow deep? Are you good ground in which the seeds of the gospel can take root and bring forth fruit?

Elder M. Russell Ballard said in his October 2012 conference address:

*How do we take the seed of faith that has been nurtured in our minds and plant it deep in the fertile soil of our souls? How do we make the mighty change of heart that Alma says is essential for our eternal happiness and peace? ["Be Anxiously Engaged," Ensign, November 2012, 30]*

These questions posed by Elder Ballard are important for our eternal education. What do we do to plant the seed of faith in our hearts so that we can become disciples of Christ? This is a key question in education. How do students truly learn? Is a lecture in a classroom the best way to help students gain knowledge? Can students do a few homework problems and feel confident that they know the material? Just listening to others who are experts in a field is not enough to truly know something—to have it planted in your heart.

As educators we want our students to experience learning in multiple ways. We want students to read, to practice skills, and to discuss with others how they understand what they are learning. We want them to have personal experiences with knowledge. Then understanding becomes embedded in them and makes their learning personal and real. If we are to become disciples of Christ, we need to have personal experiences with what that means. What personal experiences have you had that have helped you become like Christ?

Have you ever been asked to do something for someone when you really did not want to do it? If you did it anyway, did you feel good about it? Did you get that feeling that service is a good thing to do? One of the blessings of service is the feeling of becoming like Christ. Initially you might have served others because your mind knew that you should. You might have heard friends or family members talk about serving others, and you might have done service in a group with others. But then one day you experienced service that *you* decided was worth doing, and the seed was planted in your heart. It was planted deep in your heart,

and it began to grow. From that time on it began to help you in your eternal education to become a disciple of Christ.

In Alma 41 and the story of Alma's instruction to Corianton we see that the true nature of our heart—that which is planted and growing in our heart—is the nature that will be restored to us in the Resurrection:

*And it is requisite with the justice of God that men should be judged according to their works; and if their works were good in this life, and the desires of their hearts were good, that they should also, at the last day, be restored unto that which is good.*

*And if their works are evil they shall be restored unto them for evil. Therefore, all things shall be restored to their proper order, every thing to its natural frame—mortality raised to immortality, corruption to incorruption—raised to endless happiness to inherit the kingdom of God, or to endless misery to inherit the kingdom of the devil, the one on one hand, the other on the other. [Alma 41:3–4]*

So our eternal education, that of becoming a disciple of Christ, requires that we plant the seed of the gospel in our hearts—and live it. The garden metaphor helps us understand that we can plant the seed of the gospel in our hearts through our personal experiences.

### **Education as a Family**

The final metaphor that we discussed in my education class is that of education as a family. How does a family help us think about education in a classroom—and about our eternal education?

Elder Paul E. Koelliker stated:

*The Father's plan designated the pattern of the family to help us learn, apply, and understand the power of love. . . .*

*Because of the heaven-designed pattern of the family, we more fully understand how our Heavenly Father truly loves each of us equally and fully. ["He Truly Loves Us," Ensign, May 2012, 18]*

Children start life so dependent on their parents for everything: food, warmth, and safety. Parents teach their children, and sometimes that means correcting them. A truly loving parent is not demeaning when their children make mistakes. Instead, they help their children see what they need to do to make things right or to improve and to grow.

At school children learn many things beyond skills and knowledge. They learn to share, to work hard, to experience new things, to ask questions, and to explore new ideas. They learn to care about people other than themselves. Children in school may not always want to do their homework or practice a skill, but a teacher can help them see how this work will help them grow. Like loving parents, good teachers point out the small successes of their students so that their students will want to keep trying, to keep working, and to keep growing.

In a family in which children are taught the gospel, they learn to pray, to read the scriptures, and to go to church. They have experiences in which they feel the Spirit, and those experiences can help them recognize that feeling in the future. They *practice* being a disciple of Christ so that they can *become* a disciple of Christ. In the family is where they experience the gospel.

When I think of a family, I think of love and sacrifice. Parents love their children for many reasons, partly because they serve them every day. They sacrifice for them. They give their lives for them by giving their time and their resources to ensure their children's growth and success. Parents want the best for their children. I think that most parents would say their acts of love and service are not sacrifices—rather, giving their lives for their children is a joy.

There are many ways in which we learn to serve others and sacrifice for them. The Church provides opportunities for us to be of service. Last summer, when there was a great deal of wind damage in Davis County, bishops dis-

missed church after sacrament meeting so that members of the Church could cut up fallen trees and remove destroyed fences—truly serving each other. Similarly, Brigham Young sent Church members out from their meetings to help those struggling on the plains. During the 2012 general Relief Society meeting, President Henry B. Eyring spoke of the kind, loving Relief Society sisters who helped a family with preparing food, cleaning, and shopping when a tiny baby was born fifteen weeks early (see “The Caregiver,” *Ensign*, November 2012, 121–22).

Are we learning to serve others from these examples? Do we see the needs of others even when Church leaders do not ask us to give service? How does the family metaphor help us answer these questions?

The family metaphor is critical to the way in which we live the gospel. We know we are all eternal brothers and sisters in an eternal family. We know we share a loving Heavenly Father and a common Savior, who is our Elder Brother. I hope that as we become more like Christ we will want the best for others in the same way we want the best for our earthly families. I hope that we can love and serve everyone around us because we see them as members of our eternal family. If we love and serve others as we do the members of our earthly family, then it is not such a sacrifice to love and serve them any more than it is a sacrifice to be a parent.

In Alma 43 we read about how Corianton had learned the lesson of the family metaphor. When Corianton came to understand all that his father, Alma, had taught him, he spent the rest of his life teaching others the gospel:

*And now it came to pass that the sons of Alma did go forth among the people, to declare the word unto them. And Alma, also, himself, could not rest, and he also went forth.*

*Now we shall say no more concerning their preaching, except that they preached the word, and the truth, according to the spirit of prophecy and*

*revelation; and they preached after the holy order of God by which they were called.* [Alma 43:1–2]

Corianton and his brothers and his father lived the rest of their lives sharing the gospel with others. They showed their love for their eternal family through their service. Did Corianton do this as a sacrifice or because it gave him joy? I think it gave him joy because he understood that gaining his eternal education and becoming a disciple of Christ was not a race to be won but a lifelong journey. He began to coach others in how they should live the gospel. He had planted the seed of the gospel in his heart so that it could grow and rise with him in the Resurrection. He found joy in the loving service he gave to his eternal brothers and sisters by sharing the gospel with them.

#### **“In the Path of Discipleship”**

It is my prayer today that you will think about what it means to gain an eternal education—an education in which you become a disciple of Christ.

I pray that you will remember the race metaphor—that you will know you are not in

a race with others for eternal life and that you will listen to those who are like coaches and who teach you how to develop as a disciple of Christ.

I pray that you can place the seed of the gospel in your heart and that your experiences living the gospel will help that seed to grow.

I pray that you will prepare for eternal life by loving and serving all of mankind as part of your eternal family—not as a sacrifice but with joy in the service.

In the Priesthood session of general conference in October 2012, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf stated what it means to be a disciple of Christ. Let me close with his remarks:

*Let us deepen our faith in our Lord, Jesus Christ. Let us take upon ourselves His name and commit each single day to walk anew in the path of discipleship. Let our works make our faith perfect. Through discipleship we may be perfected one step at a time by serving our family, our fellowmen, and God.* [“The Joy of the Priesthood,” *Ensign*, November 2012, 60]

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.