

The Cycle of Becoming

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I'm very humbled to be here today. First, I would like to say how much BYU means to my family and me. My father's formal education only went through the eighth grade. But he knew how much education meant—four of his six children graduated from BYU, and two of our children also have degrees here, as well as a son-in-law and daughter-in-law. Having been born and raised in Provo, I have always loved this campus and the events that take place here that have been part of my life. As a young man I never imagined having the opportunity to finish my working career at BYU. However, after being here for the past 25 years, my feelings are even deeper for everything Brigham Young University represents. Words aren't strong enough to express my gratitude to a man named Bill Hays for inviting me to be on this campus and to those whom I've had the opportunity to work with since.

I have chosen to speak today on the cycle of becoming, which describes our progress in this life and, eventually, the kingdom that we'll choose—one that our Father in Heaven has prepared for us. The three parts of the cycle are learning or knowledge; doing or, in some cases, not doing; and becoming.

We've been taught that at some point in our premortal lives, our Father in Heaven

presented a plan that would make it possible for us to move beyond what we had become. It seems that the cycle, or some parts of it, had included us having knowledge of our Father in Heaven's plan and our relationship with our Elder Brother as our Savior. We had done the things necessary to prepare us to move to the next stage—becoming mortal. Faith would have been part of the decision-making process in that premortal life. The things we would experience in mortality had to be accepted on faith. Most important of all, we had to accept the fact that once we left God's presence, we could not return without the help of the Savior. Our faith had to also be centered in Jesus Christ and His ability to take us back to our Father in Heaven's kingdom.

Knowledge

Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on how you look at it) when we came to earth, the knowledge part of the cycle got erased, and we had to start that part over. The Bible Dictionary defines *knowledge* as follows:

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One of the attributes of God (Isa. 46:9–10; Acts 15:18; 2 Ne. 9:20). Knowledge of divine and spiritual things is absolutely essential for one's salvation; hence the gospel is to be taught to every soul. "How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?" (Rom. 10:14). Knowledge is not obtained all at once, even by revelation, but line upon line, precept upon precept (Isa. 28:9–10). [Bible Dictionary, s.v. "knowledge," 721]

President Boyd K. Packer said the following about this process:

Things that grow slowly live longer. You will find that you will acquire the gospel "line upon line, precept upon precept" (2 Ne. 28:30; D&C 98:12; 128:21; see also Isa. 28:10, 13). You may grow more slowly in mind and spirit, but you will learn and your learning will stay with you." ["Some Things Every Missionary Should Know," Seminar for New Mission Presidents — 2002 (26 June), 6]

The Bible Dictionary continues:

The scriptures, and also living prophets, are given so that the people might have knowledge of things of God and "know how to worship, and know what you worship" (cf. D&C 93:19). Knowledge is one of the endowments of the Holy Ghost (John 14:26; 16:13; D&C 34:10; 121: 26–33) and one of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:8; Moro. 10:10; D&C 46:18).

President Packer also said:

The basic foundation of knowledge and testimony never changes — the testimony that God the Father lives, that Jesus is the Christ, that the Holy Ghost inspires us, that there has been a restoration, that the fulness of the gospel and the same organization that existed in the primitive church have been revealed to us. Those things are taught everywhere and always — in our classes, the scriptures, the handbooks and the manuals — in everything we do.

The fundamental doctrine and instructions on the organization of the Church are likewise found in the scriptures. In addition, there is another source of knowledge relating to what makes the Church work: We learn from experience and observation. ["The Unwritten Order of Things," BYU devotional address, 15 October 1996]

At the same time we're working on the knowledge part of our eternal cycle, we have this cycle within a cycle going on in which we are trying to get educated through "experience and observation," as President Packer described, so that we can have the knowledge base to do things that will fulfill temporal needs and aspirations. Your academic knowledge will allow you to become, hopefully, engineers, doctors, nurses, lawyers, teachers, counselors, artists, etc. I can tell you as a parent that through your educational experience, regardless of what avenue you pursue, one of the things that your parents want you to become is employed.

This cycle of learning, doing, and becoming is literally going on in some micro or miniature form every day of our lives. That's how we've become who we are today. The question then becomes "Are we where we're supposed to be in becoming who we told our Heavenly Parents we would become?"

That's somewhat easier to measure from a temporal perspective than it is from a spiritual. From an academic perspective, you know where you are in school and how much you have left to do before you can graduate. There are systems put in place to help you measure your progress in entering whatever professional career you're pursuing. One purpose of academics is to assist you in gaining positions in this life that will allow you to provide for yourself and your family.

Doing and Not Doing

The second part of the cycle, in an ideal situation, would be the wise use of our knowledge

by doing things that keep us moving along life's path both temporally and spiritually. This is often the tough part. In our premortal lives I would think that our knowledge was more complete, but there were certain things we couldn't do without a mortal body. In this life, with our somewhat limited knowledge, we often reach a point where we must make choices to do or not do things that meet immediate and long-term wants or needs. These choices, and what we do with them, shape our lives and define who we are and who we will become. Many of us know by firsthand experience that it's not always easy to do the right thing every time.

To illustrate this, here are two stories of young men in different centuries who answered a call from a prophet. The first happened in 1856. Most of you have heard this story about the last of the handcart companies coming west. The Martin and Willie group was in desperate trouble because of a late start and an early winter. President Brigham Young put out a call in general conference for men to gather their wagons, supplies, and teams and go and rescue these people. As part of those that left, three young men, all 18 years old, answered the call.

*Three eighteen-year-old boys belonging to the relief party came to the rescue and to the astonishment of all who saw, carried nearly every member of that ill-fated handcart company across the snowbound stream. The strain was so terrible, and the exposure so great, that in later years all the boys died from the effects of it. When President Brigham Young heard of this heroic act, he wept like a child, and later declared publicly, "That act alone will ensure C. Allen Huntington, George W. Grant and David P. Kimball an everlasting salvation in the Celestial Kingdom of God, worlds without end." [Solomon F. Kimball, "Belated Emigrants of 1856," *Improvement Era*, February 1914; also in LeRoy R. Hafen and Ann W. Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), 132–33]*

Now, fast forward to several years ago and consider three young men who also answered a call from the prophet at approximately the same age of 19 years and came to the Missionary Training Center as missionaries. For some reason they couldn't quite grasp why they were there and immediately started having problems. As their branch president, I received reports that they were causing problems in their classes and doing other inappropriate things. Although they were companions, I met with each of them individually, discussed these problems, and challenged them to remember who they were and who they represented and, if nothing else, to simply look at the Savior's name on their badges on a regular basis as a reminder. A week later I received a report that things had not improved. So on a Sunday I met with them again and went over what was and wasn't appropriate. That same day they went back to their room and played what turned out to be a very inappropriate prank on another missionary, which led to more serious consequences. At this point, the decision from Church headquarters in Salt Lake City was that they apparently were not ready to be representatives of the Church and needed to go home.

In both cases, three young men had answered a call, but each set chose to take different routes. What was the difference? Two of the words that come to mind are *agency* and *perspective*. I'm guessing that each of us can find examples in our own lives in which opportunities have been given us, and, in looking back, we can see either that we utilized them and growth took place or that we missed out and paid the price for not following our conscience.

In my own case, on an even more personal note, a few years ago I was preparing some rooms in our house to be painted. I was going through the living room patching nail holes. There was a dent in the ceiling above the entryway. That house had a split entry, so the ceiling

was a floor and a half from the entry landing. I got my six-foot ladder and put it on the landing, assuming that it would be high enough. I took my perfatape mud and putty knife and climbed up the ladder. When I reached the top platform, I read printed on the ladder “This is not a step.” Now, I was sure that did not apply to me, and I climbed up. (You know where this is going, don’t you?) I stood on top of the ladder and reached as far as I could, fully extended. Just as I filled the hole with the first pass of the putty knife, the ladder tipped and I crashed to the floor—not the landing, but the basement floor. Now, the ladder is six feet tall, and I’m over six feet tall. There are some five steps to the basement, so my head was more than 16 feet from the basement floor.

When I crashed, Linda and our daughter rushed to see what had happened. I was lying there, not able to breathe because the wind had been knocked out of me. They kept asking if I was all right. Finally I caught my breath and told them I thought I was okay. I was hurting but could get up. They insisted I go to the emergency room. When the doctors checked me, they found that I had two cracked vertebrae, a cracked rib, and some bruises. Other than that I was okay. I knew I had been blessed because I could have broken my neck or my back.

When my wife called one of our daughters that evening to tell her about the accident, she repeated it for our granddaughter, and my granddaughter said, “Tell grandpa what he always told his kids when they were growing up.” My wife said, “What’s that?” She said, “When you’ve got a dumb head, the whole body suffers.” She was absolutely right, and my words came back to me because my whole body was suffering.

Maybe you can think of dumb things that have happened in your lives that may or may not have led to your whole physical body suffering. But is our spiritual body suffering

because of poor choices, missed opportunities, and unrepented transgressions?

We often know more than we choose to do. As we mature, our goal should be to find wisdom in the application of the knowledge we are gaining along the way. The proper use of our knowledge is how we demonstrate wisdom. Making choices that lead to doing things that keep us on the eternal path to becoming what our Heavenly Father wants us to become must be part of our daily quest. Marion G. Romney said:

Since knowledge is [according to Webster’s dictionary] an “acquaintance with, or clear perception of, facts”; and “wisdom is the capacity of judging soundly and dealing broadly with facts; especially in their practical” application “to life and conduct,” it follows that wisdom . . . is nevertheless a product of, and is dependent upon knowledge.

*. . . Thus, as God’s perfect wisdom is a product of His knowledge of all things, so man’s wisdom is dependent upon his knowledge. [“Converting Knowledge into Wisdom,” *Ensign*, July 1983, 5]*

As we consider our daily wants and needs as mentioned earlier, we must find ways to be guided along the right path. On the one hand, we’re told, “It is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward.” (D&C 58:26). On the other hand, we need help in keeping an eternal perspective. How do we get and keep this eternal perspective? It starts with the basic things we hear on a regular basis. Daily prayer and scripture study are absolute musts. In my various ecclesiastical callings, I’ve never worked with anyone who had lost their testimony or fallen away while they were praying and studying the scriptures on a daily basis.

At the MTC we often discussed doing things that lead to becoming a true disciple of Jesus Christ. My approach in teaching that was one

I called “living above the line.” I would explain that there is a gumpion trap some fall into regarding minimums and maximums in life. You as students are very familiar with it. When you begin a class, your professor explains what the requirements are to pass and what level of performance you’ll need to earn each grade. In many cases the grade that you decide you want or need as defined by the professor represents the minimum you can do. If that’s your main focus or objective for the class, then that minimum level becomes your maximum effort.

I would challenge the missionaries to not get caught up in the minimum and maximum lines. As a true disciple of the Savior, you wouldn’t have to be reminded about the rules in the little white missionary handbook. You wouldn’t need to be reminded to get up at a certain time, to pray and study each day, and to seek the Spirit for guidance. You wouldn’t even need to be reminded to be nice to your companion. All of those things would be the natural consequences of becoming a disciple of Christ. Access to the Spirit is much more available “above the line.” Your life can then leave the daily checklists of things you cannot do and things you should be doing and move into the realm of doing the “right” thing.

In referring to these basic commandments, Elder Neal A. Maxwell described the “thou shalt not” commandments as the “misery prevention” ones (my title for those would be the “dumb head, body suffers” commandments):

Then the major focus falls upon the “thou shalt” commandments. It is the keeping of the “thou shalt” commandments that brings even greater happiness. [“The Pathway of Discipleship,” BYU devotional, 4 January 1998]

Your efforts will be blessed in your schooling, your work, your activities, and, most importantly, your relationships with those around you and, ultimately, the Savior Jesus Christ and your Father in Heaven.

When our son was 11 years old, I was serving in a bishopric. There was an annual hike taking place with many of the Scouting age Young Men and some Young Women in this area called the 50/20 that was established, I think, to help with some of the Scouting program’s hiking requirements. It was held in the fall, and the idea was that you would hike 50 miles in under 20 hours. It started at the This Is the Place Monument on the east side of Salt Lake City and traveled south to Provo, finishing at a park on Fifth West and Center Street.

Many of the Young Men in our ward had participated the year before and were going to do it again. I asked my son if he would like to try it, even though I thought that at 11 years old, he might not be ready. He said he wanted to go. I talked with others who had done it and was told that it was critical to bring fluids and nourishment and to take care of your feet with adequate padding, changes of socks, and good shoes. The hike started at six in the evening and went throughout the night so that there was less traffic on the roads.

The first half of the hike went pretty well, except for the fact that I couldn’t get him to drink and eat enough. Several hours after midnight we reached the top of the Point of the Mountain, approximately halfway. He was pretty tired and worn out. There are many that only make it halfway, so I told him we could make that the end of our hike and just go home. As he watched some of the older boys arrive after us and could see that they were every bit as tired as he was, he realized that they were not quitting. So after some hot chocolate and nourishment, I asked him what he wanted to do. He said, “Let’s keep going.” I asked him if he was sure, knowing that he had never even stayed up all night, let alone hiked that far. He said, “Yes.”

We made it down the south side of the point of the mountain, and it was obvious he was tiring very quickly. As we walked the old highway through Lehi in the darkest part of

the night, I looked down and saw that tears were running down his cheeks and that he was just barely moving his feet. I asked him if he wanted to quit and go home. He wouldn't answer. Knowing he's as stubborn as his father, I just put my arm around his shoulders and walked in silence for a while.

Then I said, "Jason, I can make you a promise. This is the hardest part of the hike. It's the darkest part of the night, and your body knows you should be in bed. But here's what I've learned after working some graveyard shifts. If you want to keep going, there's a fast-food place down the road. We will stop there and have a hot breakfast. About that time the sun should be coming up. There's something about the sun coming up after being up all night that gives us new life. I promise you that the hot breakfast and the sun coming up will give you new energy to finish the hike if you want to."

No answer. He just kept shuffling along. When we got to the drive-in, we ordered breakfast. After we ate and noticed the sun coming up, I said, "How do you feel?"

He said, "Let's go, Dad." We took off, and I could hardly keep up with him. We finished in just under 18 hours. The next year, when the opportunity came again, he signed up, knowing he could do it. It was every bit as hard, but he knew what to expect.

I've thought back on our experience many times since. My hope at the time was that he would also look back on that when things got tough, particularly on his mission or at other times, and know that the sun will eventually come up, new life will be given, and you'll get where you need to go if you'll keep going.

We all have times when it seems like the night will never end. It's dark all around, and we don't know for sure how far we have yet to go. Those are the times that we can feel the Savior walking beside us with His loving arm around our shoulder, encouraging us to keep going.

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf said this in our recent April conference:

*Discipleship is a journey. We need the refining lessons of the journey to craft our character and purify our hearts. By patiently walking in the path of discipleship, we demonstrate to ourselves the measure of our faith and our willingness to accept God's will rather than ours. ["The Way of the Disciple," *Ensign*, May 2009, 76]*

What if we're not as far along the path of discipleship as we think we should be or if we've gotten off the path and now feel we can't become who we're supposed to be? Maybe we've disappointed ourselves or those who love us. Before we came to earth we knew with a surety that the Savior would take care of all of our shortcomings. Now we can find that same assurance through the process of becoming. It doesn't matter where we are—it only matters that we are moving along the path and making our best effort. Again, this is a step-by-step process and a lifelong journey.

Daily scripture study and prayer to find out your Heavenly Father's will for your life will lead to a softer heart that can be influenced by the Spirit. That Spirit will prompt us to repent of those things holding us back from becoming and progressing. What a great blessing we have every week to be able to take a broken heart and contrite spirit to sacrament meeting. Partake of the sacrament worthily and you will be as clean as if you were just baptized, and you will be under the influence of the Spirit for the next thing you need to learn and do. Be worthy for the companionship of the Holy Ghost. Life can be challenging enough by itself. Don't try to go it alone.

Now, where can we go to learn about this cycle in the most profound way? In our most recent general conference, we were reminded several times of the importance of finding ways to get to the temple on a regular basis—not just

to attend but also to engage in actual temple worship.

This is where we can go and, by performing work for others, be taught all that we need to know regarding who we are. Elder Russell M. Nelson said this about the temple:

*Each temple is a house of learning. There we are taught in the Master's way. His way differs from modes of others. His way is ancient and rich with symbolism. We can learn much by pondering the reality for which each symbol stands. Teachings of the temple are beautifully simple and simply beautiful. They are understood by the humble, yet they can excite the intellect of the brightest minds. ["Personal Preparation for Temple Blessings," *Ensign*, May 2001, 33]*

Because temples are nearby for many of us, we need to find ways to get there as often as we can. We need to take the opportunity to experience all of the ordinances by rotating our temple experience and, as Elder Richard G. Scott said in our last general conference, by "listen[ing] carefully to the presentation of each element of the ordinance with an open mind and heart" ("Temple Worship: The Source of Strength and Power in Times of Need," *Ensign*, May 2009, 43).

In D&C 109, we read the Kirtland Temple dedicatory prayer and learn some of the blessings of temple attendance:

And that they may grow up in thee, and receive a fulness of the Holy Ghost, and be organized according to thy laws, and be prepared to obtain every needful thing; . . .

And when thy people transgress, any of them, they may speedily repent and return unto thee, and find favor in thy sight, and be restored to the blessings which thou hast ordained to be poured out upon those who shall reverence thee in thy house.

And we ask thee, Holy Father, that thy servants may go forth from this house armed with thy power, and that thy name may be upon them, and thy glory

be round about them, and thine angels have charge over them. [D&C 109:15, 21–22]

Becoming

In conclusion, the final part of the cycle is that of becoming. Regarding the temporal or vocational stage of our lives, Elder Russell M. Nelson referred to this concept of becoming when he spoke at BYU's commencement exercises on April 23, 2009. He called a chosen occupation

only a means to an end; it is not an end in itself.

The end for which each of you should strive is to be the person that you can become—the person that God wants you to be. The day will come when your professional career will end. . . . The career that you will have labored so hard to achieve—the work that will have supported you and your family—will one day be behind you.

Then you will have learned this great lesson: Much more important than what you have done for a living is what kind of a person you have become. . . .

Keep learning and keep preparing for your ultimate graduation day. From time to time ask yourself these questions: Am I ready to meet my Maker? Am I worthy of all the blessings He has in store for His faithful children? Have I received my endowment and sealing ordinances of the temple? Have I remained faithful to my covenants? Have I qualified for the greatest of all God's blessings—the blessing of eternal life? ["Neither Trust in the Arm of Flesh," BYU commencement address, 23 April 2009; emphasis in original]

I believe that no matter how busy our lives get, we will be given the opportunity and time to do what is expected of us if we stay focused on the little things. Each of us have a gift or gifts given to us for the specific purpose of doing the things we're supposed to in order to become who our Father in Heaven wants us to become. Find your gifts and use them to bless others.

We ought to have and will have challenges. They will be the building blocks for your future life and the person you are becoming.

It is my prayer that each of us can find true knowledge as revealed by the Holy Ghost through proper efforts of prayer, study, and temple worship. I pray also that we may find answers to our prayers by Heavenly Father revealing to us who we really are and, just as importantly whose we really are. I pray that we might find joy in our journey toward discipleship, that we might each day move toward our goal of becoming more Christlike by fulfilling our temple covenants, and that we will approach each day with thanksgiving for opportunities to do the right things and know

that our Father in Heaven will continue to bless us in our efforts.

Elder Maxwell said:

If we can get that witness for ourselves that we are his and that he loves us, then we can cope with and endure well whatever comes in the varied tactical situations of life. [“The Pathway of Discipleship”]

I know the gospel is true. I love my Father in Heaven and His Son, Jesus Christ. I know that through the Atonement we can fulfill Heavenly Father’s plan to gain eternal life and become all that He has promised we can become, and I so testify, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.