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A Child of God

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A Child of God

HENRY B. EYRING

One of the reasons I love to come to this campus is to see you, the young people of the Church. Invariably it seems to me that you look even better than you did the last time I was with you. Because I came today expecting that experience, I was reminded of an account written a number of years ago by General James Gavin. He was a young general in the American army during World War II. He commanded the 82nd Airborne Division. He led them in the invasion of Sicily. There were casualties there. He parachuted with them behind enemy lines during the invasions in France. They lost more men there. Then he led them in the bloody battles in Belgium when the Germans counterattacked, taking a terrible toll among his troops.

General Gavin's soldiers were given some well-earned leave. Some of them went to Paris. A general from another Allied army saw them there. Later, when he met General Gavin, he said that he had never seen better looking soldiers. General Gavin's laconic reply was that they ought to look good: they were the survivors.

You look good. You ought to look good, because you are the survivors. By making the right choices plus the help of uncounted servants of God, you have made it through a hail

of spiritual bullets. There have been tens of thousands of casualties. You know some of them because they are your friends, your spirit brothers and your sisters. You are more than simply the survivors of that spiritual war. You are the future of the Church. God knows that. And so he now asks more of you than he has asked of those who were here before you, because the kingdom will need more. And Satan knows that you are the future of the Church, which gives me a solemn obligation to warn you of the hazards ahead and to describe how to survive them as you rise to the privileges God will give you.

I will speak today of one of the great things God asks of you and how you will deal with the spiritual hazard that always comes with it.

You are under mandate to pursue—not just while you are here, but throughout your lives—educational excellence. That is true for you as individual members of the Church and for this university as a community. And yet the Lord gives the warning of danger as he gives

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the charge. You remember the words from the Book of Mormon:

O that cunning plan of the evil one! O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish. [2 Nephi 9:28]

You are to pursue educational excellence while avoiding pride, the great spiritual destroyer. Most people would question whether it is possible to pursue excellence in anything without feeling some measure of pride.

A professional basketball player in the National Basketball Association sat next to me on a plane just after President Benson gave a talk warning about pride. In general conference President Benson had said that there was no such thing as righteous pride. My seatmate hadn't heard the talk, so I told him about it and asked whether he could excel in the NBA down under the basket if he were stripped of all pride. His quiet answer was that he doubted that he could survive at all, let alone excel.

A Broadway star had a colorful way of expressing his opinion about the place of pride in his work. He had been hired to be the lead in a production of *Fiddler on the Roof* with a cast of college students. I was asked to give a prayer with the cast on opening night. The Broadway veteran, who had played the part hundreds of times, stood at the back of a ring of students gathered around me just before the curtain was to go up. He looked puzzled.

As I recall now, I prayed about the way you might have done. I pleaded with God that the members of the cast would be lifted above their natural abilities, that the stage equipment would function well, that the hearts of the audience would be softened, and that they would be touched. I can't remember much else

of the prayer, but I can remember what happened just after I said "Amen."

The Broadway star jumped into the air, landed on the stage with the sound of an explosion coming from his heavy boots, slapped his hands to his sides, and then thrust them into the air and shouted, "Okay, now let's go for it!" If the audience heard his bellow, and I can't imagine that they didn't, they must have expected the cast to come charging through the curtain out into the audience bent on some kind of mayhem.

I can only assume that he was determined to counteract the terrible mistake he had just witnessed. The last thing on earth he wanted was to go on a stage with a bunch of amateur actors who had been infected with humility.

I will not tell you today how to pursue excellence and humility simultaneously in the NBA or on Broadway. In those settings, if you get there, you will have to find your own way.

But I will tell you that not only can you pursue educational excellence and humility at the same time to avoid spiritual danger but that the way to humility is also the doorway to educational excellence. The best antidote I know for pride also can produce in us the characteristics that lead to excellence in learning.

Let's start with the problem of pride. There is more than one antidote for it. Some of them don't take any action on our part. Life delivers them. Failure, illness, disaster, and losses of all kinds have a way of chipping away at pride. But they come in uneven doses. Too much can come at one time and crush us with discouragement or embitter us. Or the antidote can come too late, after pride has made us vulnerable to temptation.

There is a better way. There is something we can choose to do in our daily life that will provide a constant protection against pride. It is simply to remember who God is and what it means to be his child. That is what we covenant to do each time we take the sacrament, promising always to remember the Savior.

Because of what has been revealed to us about the plan of salvation, remembering him can produce the humility that will be our protection. And then, as we will see later, that same choice to remember him will in time produce in us greater power to learn both what we need to know for living in this world and in the life to come.

Remembering the Savior produces humility this way: Because we are blessed by revelation from prophets in this dispensation, we see his part in the plan of salvation, and from that we come to know both our loving Heavenly Father and what it means to be his spirit child.

When we remember the Savior we see him as the creator of all things, about which the wisest of us knows so little. We remember our dependence on his sacrifice when we think of the fall of man and of our own sins. We remember his unending love for us and his arms extended in invitation to us when we think of the little we understand of what he did to atone for our sins. We remember that we will only come again to our Heavenly Father to live forever in families by obeying his commandments and having the Holy Ghost to guide us. And we remember his example of complete submission to the will of his Father and our Father.

Those memories, if we choose to invite them, can produce a powerful blend of courage and meekness. No problem is too hard for us with his help. No price is too great to pay for what he offers us. And still in our greatest successes we feel as little children. And in our greatest sacrifices we still feel in his debt, wanting to give more. That is a humility which is energizing, not enervating. We can choose that shield as a protection against pride. And when we make that choice, to remember him, we are at the same time choosing to do what can lead us to acquire the characteristics of great learners.

That view of what it means to be a child of God, if we choose to act on it as reality, will lead us to do what great learners do. Those habits are not unique to those who understand

and have faith in the revelations of God. The principles of learning work the same for all people, whether or not they know and believe in the plan of salvation. But we have an advantage. We can remember the Savior, think again of what the revelations tell us about who we are, and then we can choose to act on that reality. That will make us better learners. And by making those choices together, we can forge a learning community.

I'll talk about just a few of those habits of great learners. In each instance you will recognize them. You have known great scholars and observed them carefully. There are some common patterns in what they do. And each of those habits will be strengthened by acting in our daily life on our faith that the plan of salvation is a description of reality.

The first characteristic behavior is to welcome correction. You've noticed that in the people around you who seem to be learning most. You see that in your fellow students, for instance, who value wise editing of their writing. If they seek that correction, study it when they get it, and then revise what they have written, they become better writers. In the same way the scientists who submit their work to be reviewed by those who understand their methods and their research findings make the most rapid progress.

I have to insert something here. There must be one mathematics major sitting here who knows history and who may say, "But, Brother Eyring, there was a famous mathematician, and after his death it was found that he had never shared some of his best work with anyone."

My response is that there would have been more if he had shared it. The desire to receive wise correction is a hallmark of a learner and of a community of learners. That is why you can appreciate getting back one of your papers when it is covered with jottings in red ink. The wise learner cares more for the jottings than for the grade at the top of the page. In the same

way the wise student of a new language seeks not the tutor who praises whatever they say but one who won't let a mispronounced word or an error in conjugating a verb pass uncorrected.

That desire for correction, a mark of great learners, comes naturally to a Latter-day Saint who knows and values what it means to be a child of God. For him or her it begins with seeking frequent correction directly from our Heavenly Father. One of the most valuable forms of personal revelation can come before private prayer. It can come in the quiet contemplation of how we might have offended, disappointed, or displeased our Heavenly Father. The Spirit of Christ and the Holy Ghost will help us feel rebuke and at the same time the encouragement to repent. Then prayers asking for forgiveness become less general and the chance to have the Atonement work in our life becomes greater.

We have another advantage as Latter-day Saints. We know that a loving Father has allowed us to live in a time when Jesus Christ has called prophets and others to serve as judges in Israel. Because of that we listen to a prophet's voice or sit in counsel with a bishop with the hope that we will hear correction.

That is true because we know something of the nature of God and our own condition. There was a fall. There was a veil placed over our memories. We walk by faith. Because of our mortality, we all sin. We cannot return to our Father unless we repent and, by keeping covenants, are washed clean through the sacrifice of his Son. We know he has placed servants to offer us both his covenants and his correction. We see the giving and the taking of correction as priceless and sacred. That is at least one of the reasons why the Lord warned us to seek as our teachers only men and women who are inspired of him. And that is one of the reasons why this learning community welcomes prophets to lead it.

A second characteristic of great learners is that they keep commitments. Any community

functions better when people in it keep their promises to live up to its accepted standards. But for a learner and for a community of learners, that keeping of commitments has special significance.

That is why we sometimes describe our fields of study as "disciplines." You've noticed as you studied in different fields that they have different rules. In physics there are some rules about how to decide to believe something is true. That is sometimes called the "scientific method." But when you move over into your course in engineering or in geology, you find yourself learning some slightly different rules. When you arrive in your history or your French literature class, you find yet another set of rules. And your accounting professor seems to be living in a very different world of many rules. You will someday, if you haven't yet, experience the turmoil of trying to learn in a discipline that is trying to agree on new rules but failing.

What all disciplines have in common is a search for rules and a commitment to them. And what all great learners have is a deep appreciation for finding better rules and a commitment to keeping them. That is why great learners are careful about what commitments they make and then keeping them.

The Latter-day Saints who see themselves in all they do as children of God take naturally to making and keeping commitments. The plan of salvation is marked by covenants. We promise to obey commandments. In return, God promises blessings in this life and for eternity. He is exact in what he requires, and he is perfect in keeping his word. Because he loves us and because the purpose of the plan is to become like him, he requires exactness of us. And the promises he makes to us always include the power to grow in our capacity to keep covenants. He makes it possible for us to know his rules. When we try with all our hearts to meet his standards, he gives us the companionship of the Holy Ghost. That in turn

both increases our power to keep commitments and to discern what is good and true. And that is the power to learn, both in our temporal studies and in the learning we need for eternity.

There is a third characteristic you have seen in great learners. They work hard. Oh, think of President Hinckley! I've traveled with him, and I know something of this great learner and how hard he works. When people quit working they quit learning, which is one of the hazards of getting too much recognition early in a career and taking it too seriously.

You will notice that the learners who can sustain that power to work hard over a lifetime generally don't do it for grades or to make tenure in a university or for prizes in the world. Something else drives them. For some it may be an innate curiosity to see how things work.

For the child of God who has enough faith in the plan of salvation to treat it as reality, hard work is the only reasonable option. Life at its longest is short. What we do here determines the rest of our condition for eternity. God our Father has offered us everything he has and asks only that we give him all we have to give. That is an exchange so imbalanced in our favor that no effort would be too much and no hours too long in service to him, to the Savior, and to our Father's children. Hard work is the natural result of simply knowing and believing what it means to be a child of God.

That leads to the description of another characteristic of a great learner: great learners help other people. Every great learner I have ever met has helped me, or tried to help me, or clearly wished to help me. That could seem to you a paradox, since people trying hard to learn might justifiably be absorbed only in themselves and what they are trying to learn. Now I know the rebuke you might give me. I'll anticipate your correction. You would say, "Is that true of all great learners?"

I answer, "Of course not." There are renowned scholars who are selfish and even unkind to those they consider less gifted. You

will meet them if you haven't yet. But those who learn most over long lives seem to have a generous view of others, both in what they can learn from other people and the capacity others have to learn. Those who can't suffer fools gladly become more foolish themselves. They have shut themselves off from what they can learn from others.

Those who learn best seem to see that everyone they meet knows something they don't and may have a capacity they don't have. Because of that you will find that the best learners make the best company.

That kindly and optimistic view of others comes naturally to the believing Latter-day Saint. Every person they will ever meet is a child of God—their brother or their sister in fact, not as a pleasant metaphor. Every person they meet, whatever their condition in this life, has been redeemed by the loving sacrifice of the Savior of the world. Every person who is accountable can exercise faith in Jesus Christ unto repentance, make and keep covenants, and qualify for eternal life, the life that God lives. Even those who are not accountable here will someday have that same potential.

With this as our reality, it is not hard to feel that the needs of those around us are as important as our own or that the most humble person has divine potential. Such thinking will lead not only to kindness and to generous appraisal of potential but to high expectations for each other. Sometimes the greatest kindness we could receive would be to have someone expect more from us than we do, because they see more clearly our divine heritage.

Here is one more characteristic: the great learner expects resistance and overcomes it. You remember from your early school days reading about the number of materials Thomas Edison tried in his search for a filament for an electric light bulb. The persistence he needed to work through failure after failure was an application of the rule of learning, not an exception to it.

That has been your experience as well. Some learning has been easy for you. But more often your enemy has been discouragement. You may try to avoid that by choosing to learn only what is easy for you, looking for the path of least resistance. But the great learner expects difficulty as part of learning and is determined to work through it.

That is a view common to believing Latter-day Saints. You may have been blessed by a mother as I was for whom the plan of salvation was reality. More than once I complained about some difficulty in my school days. Her answer, given in a matter-of-fact tone, was, “Hal, what else did you expect? Life is a test.” Then she’d go off to something else and leave me to ponder. She knew that, because I understood the plan, her statement of the obvious would give me hope, not discouragement.

I knew and she knew that to have the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob we need to face and pass comparable tests. She knew and I knew that the greater the test, the greater the compliment from a loving Heavenly Father.

She died after a decade of suffering with cancer. At her funeral President Kimball said something like this: “Some of you may wonder what great sins Mildred committed to explain her having to endure such suffering. It had nothing to do with sin. It was that her Heavenly Father wanted to polish her a little more.”

I remember as I sat there at the time wondering what trials might lay ahead for me if a woman that good could be blessed by that much hard polishing.

You and I will face difficulty in our studies and in our lives, and we expect it because of what we know about who God is and that we are his children, what his hopes are for us, and how much he loves us. He will give us no test without preparing the way for us to pass it. Because of what we know about adversity in learning, in this community of Saints we pay special honor to determined learners because

we know the price that they gladly pay. And we know from whence their power to persist through difficulty comes.

In this community we know that we are the brothers and sisters of Job, of Joseph in Egypt, of Joseph in Carthage Jail, and of Jesus in Gethsemane and on Golgotha’s hill. So we are not surprised when sorrows come. We respect their place and know their potential.

You might well wonder what I would hope will come from this brief review of the power of our faith in the plan of salvation to produce humility and the power to learn. It is not that we will now go out to seek some grand experience to transform our lives and our learning.

The way to grow in the faith that we are the children of our Heavenly Father is to act like it. The time to start is now. You’ve received some prompting in your heart while you have listened to my suggestion about what God would have you do, or do differently. Do what you have been prompted to do. Do it now. After you obey you will receive more impressions from God about what he requires of you. Keeping commandments increases the power to keep other commandments.

Today you could seek correction. You could keep a commitment. You could work hard. You could help someone else. You could plow through adversity. And as we do those things day after day, by and by we will find that we have learned whatever God would teach us for this life and for the next, with him.

You are a child of God. Our Heavenly Father lives. Jesus is the Christ, our Savior. Through Joseph Smith the knowledge of the plan of salvation was restored. If we act upon that plan as we should, it will allow us to claim eternal life, which is our inheritance. And if we act upon it, we will be blessed with a humility that gives us the power to learn and the power to serve and the power to rise up to the privileges that God wants to grant us. Of that I testify in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.