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# Speeches

*Insights from My Life*

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# *Insights from My Life*

NEAL A. MAXWELL

President Oaks, brothers and sisters, it's good to be home. I wasn't sure I qualified for continuing membership in this intellectual community after I read a definition the other day of an intellectual as "any individual who can hear the *William Tell* Overture and not think of the Lone Ranger." I don't pass that test, but I'm glad to be home.

Mention was made by President Oaks in his generous introduction of my duties in connection with priesthood correlation. Correlation is a concept I'm often asked to define. I sometimes respond by citing a story that is told about the Church when a federal army was sent out here to harass the Saints. The Brethren had decided on a policy of irritation without violence. In keeping with that policy Porter Rockwell and Lot Smith were dispatched to a distant army camp where Lot Smith was to secretly and quietly remove the pins from the army's wagon wheels while Porter Rockwell was to drive off all the army's horses. In the dark of night, Lot was busily taking out wagon wheel pins, and Porter warwhooped into the camp and drove off all the horses, including Lot Smith's. Lot later walked wearily many miles back to Church headquarters and reportedly said, "Brethren, we've just got to get correlated." Today's correlation challenges are different, but the basic need remains.

As I pondered possible topics, some members of my family urged me to use some relevant autobiographical themes. They have had to endure my tales of trudging through snow to school—snow which grew deeper with each parental retelling. They probably saw no reason why you should escape the same punishment. Beware today, therefore, those vertical pronouns and the selectivity of my memory. At other times I have spoken in praise of parents and prophets who have helped me so much, as well as about my renewing and loving wife and family.

Today's episodes involve other people, most of them not known to you. The episodes may seem small, but the lessons were large. We speak and sing in the Church of counting our blessings, and that's a good thing. So is inventorying our insights. My format today will make use of some of the sample experiences I've had, with their resultant or related insights, as a part of my inventory. As you indulge me, remember that there are wheat and chaff in every life. A wise lady once said

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*Neal A. Maxwell was a president of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 26 October 1976.*

that what we hope our friends will do is to separate the wheat from the chaff and, with a breath of kindness, blow the chaff away. I am grateful now, as I have been over the years, for friends who have had strong lungs.

### **Regrets and Aspirations**

My mid-teen years were years when there was a confluence of conditions that tried and vexed me. Those are years when peer approval weighs so heavily, as you know. I found myself contending with shortness of stature, shyness, outdoor plumbing, and a 4-H pig project—each of which had by then become an embarrassment. The periodic pain, can be smiled at now, but it was real enough then. Programmed by doting uncles and by myself in early childhood to love basketball and to aspire to become all-state, I had, until this period in my life, been more adept at basketball than most of my peers. Soon, however, I started not making the first string, and then the second. It was a bitter pill. This failure for the first time to achieve athletically—cruelly combined with other indications that I was, for the first time, outside that hard-to-define but very real inner ring—was a time of long thoughts. Somehow, being at home feeding the pigs was not like working out with the varsity—especially when the boy down the block, whom I had helped some learn to play basketball, was where I wanted to be. He went on to be all-state player, which he deserved.

During this period I noticed that recycling regrets didn't change reality. Pawing through the past is not productive. This period was a time when my aspirations got diverted to the world of words, where there were teachers who would not let me pass without genuine achievement. I honor and sustain them evermore. Thus an insight dawned, although not all at once, showing me that too much attention to what might have been actually gets in the way of what still can be. Those valleys you and I are sometimes in are really the sloping

sides of hills to be climbed, with as little muttering as possible.

### **Divine Blessings and Human Potential**

In the spring of 1945 I was on Okinawa as a frightened and barely adequate infantry replacement—concerned with victory, to be sure, but very much concerned with selfish survival. Japanese artillery pieces had tried for several days without success to hit the little plateau on which our mortar squad was located. Then one evening they dropped three shells around us. They had finally found the range, and we knew it. Surely they knew it. Since one of those shells fell just several feet from my foxhole, I was stimulated, as you might imagine, to intense prayer, full of promises. Strangely, no more shells fell near us that evening, the very time when more shells should have been fired for effect. Foxhole faith brought some real blessings that evening, causing me to make some covenants which I am still striving to keep. I have often wondered—if the Lord that night not only blessed me and others as he did, so clearly and mercifully, but had also told me to be of good cheer, for not only would I live, but one day, just a few ridges away, I would preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to an LDS chapel full of members—could I have managed that insight. Probably not; yet that is precisely what happened in 1973, twenty-eight years later, as I was privileged to go back to that island and that spot which, for me, is a sacred spot.

Sugar cane has since covered the little plateau, but not my poignant memories of Okinawa, the bloodiest battle in the Pacific. Two insights emerged. First, it is naive to think we can repay God for his blessings. I am more and more in debt to him now than I ever was in 1945, and I will be forever. God blesses according to law, but out of all proportion to the ratios we mortals reckon by. Second, along with believing in the gospel, we need to believe in our own possibilities—not as to status, but

as to power to do good. God could surprise—yes, even stun—each of us here today if we could manage such divine disclosures. Such must usually be kept from us (or can only be hinted at) for now. But specific and special opportunities are pending for every person here today, if we can trust God and do each day's duties and bear our present pain. We can't walk a straight and narrow path in the dark; hence, God gives to us the gospel, by which we get *direction, motivation, and illumination*. But there appears to be no point, I learned, in God's constantly illuminating the trail beyond where my eyes of faith can now see.

### **Praise and Criticism**

Several times in early manhood, friends (who probably did not know then that what they said had such an impact) gave me rather specific and encouraging words, prospective praise. I can remember their specific words today. (Incidentally, I have since told some of those friends who are still living how helpful they were.) You and I listen so well when we are ready to hear. These friends, like good outside auditors, confirmed my net worth and also pointed to possibilities for service in ways that were both timely and tender. Sometimes, in the mutual climb along the straight and narrow path, brothers and sisters, we need friends to shout warnings to us or to give us instructions, but we also need those moments when warm whispers can help us to keep putting one foot in front of the other. Good friends can give us the gifts of approval and acceptance and of perspective. How many of us have rendered that specific service for someone this month? How long has it been since you have been the recipient of such a gift? Perhaps too long in both instances. "Deserved specific praise" is the ingredient of fellowship, of commending Christians.

Several times in our early marriage I was thrust in a close church or professional association with those of whom I had, for one reason

or another, been critical. In one case, less than worthy words had fallen from my lips only a day or two before a call came to work with that individual, a development which turned out to be a rich and happy experience. In such circumstances, one winces for his words, and pride goes first; then comes reluctant reclassification, and finally genuine appreciation. It has happened to me several times in life. It has helped to teach me a recurring lesson: God gives to us the lessons we need most, not the ones we think we need. Also, often that which we resist learning vicariously we must learn the hard way—experientially. There is a learning efficiency that comes with being humble *per se*, because of the word, instead of being compelled to be humble and to be open. I was so grateful I was not too proud in such associations, which will, I trust, be eternal. The Christian receives a customized curriculum in life, which is but one of many signs that we have a loving *and knowing* Father in heaven.

### **Uses and Dangers of Silence**

There have been insights for me, too, about the role of silence, its usefulness and its dangers. A few dealings with student dissenters taught me (too late to help them, I'm sorry to say) that my silent disgust did not necessarily teach them. It often created distance. Unexplained indignation is not always communication. True, silence in some circumstances is a powerful reproof, but not in other situations. To withhold deserved reproof, and the reasons therefore, may be to withhold a warning that is urgently needed. Reproof is often a last railing before an erring individual goes over the edge of the cliff.

I've learned, too, that silence can also be productive, even though it makes us very anxious. A fine colleague and friend called my office shortly after I had been sustained as a General Authority to ask for an appointment. I was out, but happily my secretary scheduled an appointment, and it was for more than a

mere ten minutes. The friend came. I greeted him warmly, but, contrary to my usual style, I stayed mostly silent. His eyes brimmed with tears as finally he said that, as he had listened to conference, he knew he needed to come and set things right. I resisted the impulse to intervene reassuringly, since I knew of nothing that was wrong. He then continued, saying that he was becoming active in the Church again and knew he needed to repair certain relationships. Happily, again I resisted stemming his flow of feeling. With courage and tenderness, he indicated that at times he had said things about me that were untrue and unkind. He wanted to seek my forgiveness. Only then did I respond by telling him of my regard for him and my unawareness of and unconcern over what he had reportedly said. Most importantly, I told him of my love and admiration and forgiveness. We embraced. I expressed then my admiration also for his courage and for his manhood. He then said how difficult it had been to come that day and how he had almost called to cancel the appointment. We spoke together of the wisdom contained in Matthew 18:15 and Jesus' counsel therein as to what we should do when there are impasses in human relationships: "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." I love that man and respect him for taking the initiative, since I had been unaware of the matter. He is fully and effectively active in the kingdom today. He needed to say what he said more than I needed to hear it, but I am so grateful I did not rush in to fill the silence that morning in the lesson he taught me so well.

Spiritual silence is a school. We may think we are sitting in that school only waiting, but really we are witnessing those marvelous moments of creative communication and of new commitment.

### **Conversation and Sensational Journalism**

Ten years of interviewing on a television program on KUED increased my respect and appreciation for the lives of individuals whom I got to know a little bit more about, other than in their formal roles of U.S. senators, presidential candidates, U.S. Supreme Court justices, or prophets. The small talk of great men and women is worthwhile. We discover so many wonders when walking carefully through another's garden, not by crashing into it with a Mack truck. Tenderness is usually better than trapping, so far as learning about another is concerned. These insights have given me pause when I see so much of modern journalism searching for sensation—a search which can be addictive to journalists as well as to audiences.

Conversation is a dying art that may go underground—not because it is afraid of light, but because, in certain conversations, confidentiality and mutuality go in tandem. What I call "drop the hanky" reporters, who are still a minority, are too often in the service of accusatory patriotism, which can condition citizens to become eager to believe the worst, whereas "pure charity is never glad," Paul wrote, "when others go wrong" (1 Corinthians, chapter 13, Moffatt translation).

About twenty-two years ago, the late Senator Joseph McCarthy was finally condemned by his colleagues. I was involved in a peripheral way in that episode. I remember, after the votes were taken, that McCarthy went off the Senate floor into a small room with three or four reporters. I went in to watch the final scene. The reporters, who had over the months disagreed with him, in some ways still liked him. In their final exchanges in that room I saw how symbiotic sensationalism can be. McCarthy had been good copy, and now it was over. Some commentators concluded that erring politicians get their just due, that "time wounds all heels." But I saw, too, the realities that crucial causes often fall into the hands of

those least able to champion them effectively and also that the media use people—sometimes cruelly.

### **Workhorses and Show Horses**

While recognition is a basic human need and is important in the public service, there are those who do too many things to be seen of men. I had the privilege of seeing this on a grand scale in the U.S. Senate, where there is normally an imbalance between the show horses and the work horses. I can vividly remember standing next to Lyndon Johnson, then majority leader, one day in a Senate chamber anteroom as we both read the ticker tape with a news story about a major bill coming out of a Senate committee after months of labor. One senator, who had not been attending the sessions while the hearings were being held and the tedious testimony was being taken, had managed, nevertheless, to show up the very day the bill was reported out of committee to take his bows before waiting TV cameras. He was one of those senators who would show up for the opening of an envelope. The man at my side, later to become president, profaned in his disgust for the show horse senator, declaring that the show horse senator was also a lazy liberal who let other liberals do the work while he took the bows.

So often in human affairs I have learned the many depend upon the few to lead, to set the pace, to show the way, to deal with the detail. It was so, even in the inspired sessions of the Constitutional Convention of 1787. I'm grateful to have received, in diverse ways, that insight while yet in my twenties.

Some modest adventures of various kinds into the world of public service have helped me to see, too, that the shaping of choices in the political process is at least as important as choosing among the choices. In electoral ecology, there is a greater impact and influence at the front end of the process than in the voting booth, as sacred and special as the latter is.

The voting booth is very democratic, but the shaping of the alternatives is aristocratic; it is work that is done by a few. I've been struck over and over again in my experiences with government and politics, modest as they are, by the Lord's counsel that honest, wise, and good individuals "should be sought for diligently" and that such individuals we should "observe to uphold" (see D&C 98:10). Ponder those words. Seeking out special individuals implies that the special individuals needed may not be those who are first in line as eager volunteers. Along with the search for good candidates is the requirement that we thereafter uphold such while in office. Too many prospective candidates are rightly wary of being abandoned by friends after they have filed or after being elected. It is all so much more than going into the little voting booth and being sixty-second citizens. Lazy citizens who then complain about the choices confronting them are like those who ask not to be disturbed until time for dinner and then sit down to a spare meal and complain about the menu—when they have consistently refused to plant, cultivate, and harvest the garden from which the meal comes.

### **Family and Government**

Public service has also helped me to appreciate my many non-LDS friends, whom I have found, on the whole, to be caring and thoughtful individuals. They are able to understand when we must differ without jeopardizing what we have in common, which is so very much. My non-member friends have so often met me more than halfway in our common causes.

I do believe the gospel gives us some insights which are not easy to transmit, such as how vitally appropriate early life experiences are and their impact on society's institutions later on. We know that it is the family wherein all those virtues on which society depends are first and best developed: for

instance, self-restraint, the commitment to work, doing one's share, compassion for others. Like it or not, society and the state will mirror our homes. Adolf Hitler's early life experiences may have impacted more on Germany than the Weimar Republic's constitution.

In any event, possessed of such insights, we Latter-day Saints are often responded to a little like John the Baptist. Minus such fundamental insights, I fear that, as conditions worsen, many will react to the failures of too much government by calling for even more government. Then there will be more and more lifeboats launched because fewer and fewer citizens know how to swim. Unlike some pendulums, political pendulums do not swing back automatically; they must be pushed. History is full of instances when people have waited in vain for pendulums to swing back.

A little experience with federal and state bureaucracies has taught me that such bureaucracies are inhabited by basically good civil servants, onto whom voters have pushed too much power for their good or ours. What we unwittingly court in such circumstances is learning again, painfully, that "almost all" men can't handle authority without abusing it. Whether or not the American people, regardless of party, can tame their governments is yet to be determined, but sunset laws alone will not do it. If citizen appetites, once aroused, merely look to a new agency to do what a disestablished agency once did, it won't be enough. Addicts can always find new pushers.

In one of those illuminating but sad stories that would be funny if it had not involved something terribly important, Peter Druecker tells us that the czar of Russia in 1914 had ordered a general mobilization to fight the Germans, but then he had second thoughts about it. The czar called in his chief of staff and asked him to halt the mobilization. The general answered, "Your Majesty, this is impossible. There is no plan for calling off the mobilization

once it is started." Perhaps World War I might not have been any different regardless of what the Russians did, but the sweeping events flowing out of the collapse on the Russian front, paving the way for the rise of Bolshevism, deserve to be pondered in the context of that stupid, bureaucratic rigidity. I remember all too well a brief experience in one federal department when it reached a point in our little shop that the methodology of filing came out by directive and assumed a preeminence over our primary task. This trend was symbolically accompanied by the domesticating appearance of sweet potato foliage on the desk (which was accompanied by my disappearance from that department in search of better tasks).

### **The Church and Personal Righteousness**

Yet we need some institutionalization, even in the kingdom. Random goodness is, by itself, not enough to resist the march of evil, which takes its victims without pity or remorse. How many of the tens of thousands who went to help victims of the flood would have made their way individually to southeastern Idaho to help without the Church's organization of that concern? I am grateful that God has so organized us and that he has given us specific things to do. Otherwise, we would be like the lonely sharpshooters trying to slow the advancing army of evil. Sharpshooters can delay the enemy heroically, but such solitary souls are not the way in which counterattacks are mounted. Counterattacks must be expressed institutionally, as in the case of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Concerning this need, the Lord has given us an immense clue in an analogy when he said, "But first let my army become very great, and let it be sanctified before me . . . That the kingdoms of this world may be constrained to acknowledge that the kingdom of Zion is in very deed the kingdom of our God and his Christ" (D&C 105:31, 32). Such remarkable



recognition, brothers and sisters, will come in a time of stunning contrasts. It was President Brigham Young who said that it was revealed to him in the commencement of this Church that, as it grew and extended into the nations of the world, so also would the power of the adversary rise—cheek by jowl, wheat by tares.

To wonder if our faith is strong enough for such remarkable developments is natural. The father of Elder Bruce R. McConkie, President Oscar W. McConkie, Sr., in a situation of stress years ago prayed for adequacy. He prayed that he would be able to carry out his heavy assignment and that he could be given the faith of Enoch. The answer to his prayer was Enoch's faith came through personal righteousness. There is a great lesson, brothers and sisters, in that response, which is consistent, of course, with the words in section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants, in which we are reminded that we cannot control the powers of heaven *except* upon the principles of righteousness. If you and I want to be more effective, we must be more righteous. If we want to have more faith, we must be more righteous, and we might just as well face that reality.

In a time when increasing numbers of our fellowmen are wrongly concluding, but nevertheless concluding, that man is alone in the universe, there is a cosmic chill settling in, an astral aloneness that seems to be about and in the hearts of so many, for which the truths of the gospel are the only real remedy. The hungry of the world are reaching out for these truths, even when you and I present them fumblingly and live them less than perfectly.

### **Freedom and Violence**

In addition to this yearning for identity and belonging, we see about us also a yearning for freedom taking its familiar forms—political and economic. But we also see more and more individuals who sense that the freedom they desire involves more than a new constitutional caress. Thoughtful souls see that something

even deeper is involved. So many have erred, thinking that freedom, included both freedom to obey or not to obey eternal laws and, wrongly, that it included freedom to change those laws. Not so. Ultimately, freedom involves choice between eternal alternatives, *but not the altering of the alternatives*. We can choose wickedness or happiness, but not wickedness with happiness. A confused Cain, a vain Cain, not only murdered his brother while they conversed together in the field, but also gloried in the murder of Abel, when Cain said (probably shouted), "I am free."

So often violence creates the *illusion* of freedom or possession. So often sin creates a momentary illusion which those involved are taken in by. I've never been able to erase from my mind the boasting words of army buddies following their night of adultery, which I heard while trying to go back to sleep on an army cot no farther away from here than Camp Williams. I saw the shame of several of those same men in the days and weeks that followed. It seemed to me then, as it does now, that the raucousness and the shouting of sin, the Cain-like glorying in it, is also the sound of pain trying to erase itself.

I have found, too, that it is better to trust and sometimes be disappointed than to be forever mistrusting and be right occasionally. This is to endorse empathy, not naivete. Neither is this to suggest that our fellowship be flaccid. The finest of friends must sometimes be stern sentinels, who will insist that we become what we have the power to become. The "no" of such stern sentinels is more to be prized than a "yes" of others. God's seeming sternness is actually a sweetness beyond our comprehension.

Petitioning in prayer has taught me that the vault of heaven, with all its blessings, is to be opened only by a combination lock: one tumbler falls when there is faith, a second when there is personal righteousness, and the third, and final tumbler falls only when what is

sought is (in God's judgment, not ours) "right" for us. Sometimes we pound on the vault door for something we want very much, in faith, in reasonable righteousness, and wonder why the door does not open. We would be very spoiled children if that vault door opened any more easily than it does now. I can tell, looking back, that God truly loves me by the petitions that, in his perfect wisdom and love, he has refused to grant me. Our rejected petitions tell us not only much about ourselves, but also much about our flawless Father.

You have been patient with my reminiscences and with this very partial inventory. May I suggest you try not only counting your blessings, but also inventorying your insights from time to time. It "will surprise you what the Lord has done" in teaching you things you so much need to know. Nourish your spirits, brothers and sisters. Your spirit can drive your body and your mind beyond the borders now known to you. I vividly remember first reading the lines that went as follows: "Over a hundred years ago a sailor walked down the streets of Portsmouth, with one arm and one eye and a persistent state of nerves, and unable to tread a ship's deck without being seasick." Indeed, this man would have probably given up except his name was Admiral Lord Nelson.

Now, brothers and sisters, the spirit not only can drive the body beyond where the

body first agrees to go; the spirit can enlarge our minds beyond borders we think are fixed, which are not really fixed, but which are movable.

May God bless us to cherish the insights he has given us and to live in such a way that new insights can flow to us. As we count our blessings, let us inventory our insights also, and, in appropriate ways, share with others where they may be helpful. I witness to you, as I have so many times before and which I always do gladly, that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is *the* Church of Jesus Christ. It is a living Church, not a dying Church. It is built upon, not partial truths, but the wholeness of truth as God has given it to us. May He help us, individually, to rise to that discipleship which is so needed. The time will come in the lifetime of many here when the people of the world will acknowledge that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is, in fact, the kingdom of our God and His Christ—just what we have said all along it is. What high promises, what soul-stretching experiences await us! May we so live in order that we will not only witness these events, but also accelerate their completion and fulfillment, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.