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## Education for Real Life

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*From a talk given on the 75th anniversary of the Institute of Religion program at a Church Educational System fireside in Moscow, Idaho, on 6 May 2001.*

*Putting spiritual learning first gives our secular learning purpose.*

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Conversion brings a drive to learn. From the Restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ in the time of Joseph Smith to our own day, you can see evidence of this. Joseph Smith, as a very young man, translated the Book of Mormon from plates inscribed with a language no one on earth understood. He did it by a divine gift of revelation from God. But he later hired a tutor to teach him and other leaders of the Church ancient languages. Joseph Smith had essentially no formal schooling, yet the effect of the gospel of Jesus Christ on him was to make him want to learn more so that he could be more useful to God and to God's children.

When the Latter-day Saints were driven from Missouri by mobs, they built a city on the banks of the Mississippi River. They named it Nauvoo. In their poverty and on the western edges of the country, they formed a university.

"In 1840, Joseph Smith sought the incorporation of the City of Nauvoo, Illinois, and along with it authority to establish a university. The Nauvoo charter included authority to 'establish and organize an institution of learning within the limits of the city, for the teaching of the arts, sciences and learned professions, to be called the "University of the City of Nauvoo" ' [quoted in H. S. Salisbury, "History of Education in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," *Journal of History*, July 1922, 269].

"The first academic year in Nauvoo was that of 1841–42. The university probably was among the first municipal universities in the United States [see Wendell O. Rich, *Distinctive Teachings of the Restoration* (1962), 10]. ... The curriculum included

languages (German, French, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew), mathematics, chemistry and geology, literature, and history.

... ‘The faculty represented considerable scholarship [compared with what you would expect to find in a frontier city in those early days]’ [Milton Lynn Bennion, *Mormonism and Education* (1939), 25]. ...

“The charter of the University of the City of Nauvoo served as the foundation for the University of Deseret (now the University of Utah), established by Brigham Young in Salt Lake City in 1850. ‘Education,’ he once told this school’s Board of Regents, ‘is the power to think clearly, the power to act well in the world’s work, and the power to appreciate life’ (Bennion, p. 115). He advised: ‘A good school teacher is one of the most essential members in society’ (*JD* 10:225)” (in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 5 vols. [1992], 2:442–43).

When the Saints in Utah were still struggling to produce enough food to live, they started schools. They felt driven to lift their children toward light and to greater usefulness by education. That drive is more than a cultural tradition passed on through the generations. It is the natural fruit of living the gospel of Jesus Christ. You see it today across the world in our missionaries coming home from their brief service in the field. Those who have planted the good word of God and have served faithfully invariably have awakened in them a great desire for self-improvement. And with that comes a desire to learn more and to gain greater skills.

The purpose of God’s creations and of His giving us life is to allow us to have the learning experience necessary for us to come back to Him, to live with Him in eternal life. That is only possible if we have our natures changed through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, true repentance, and making and keeping the covenants He offers all of His Father’s children through His Church.

So the leaders of the Church have always known that the drive for learning among our people must have a powerful spiritual component. That spiritual element, when it is effective, refines and uplifts the aims of our total education.

### **Seek Learning to Serve God**

The thirst for education that comes with the change the gospel brings can be a blessing or a curse, depending on our motives. If we continue to seek learning to serve God and His children better, it is a blessing of great worth. If we begin to seek learning to exalt ourselves alone, it leads to selfishness and pride, which will take us away from eternal life.

That is one of the reasons we should always put spiritual learning first. And that is why the Church has placed institutes of religion across the earth wherever young members are gathered in sufficient numbers. Their spiritual education in the institute will shape the purpose and speed the process of their secular learning.

Listen to the words of the Lord as recorded by the Prophet Joseph Smith in the Doctrine and Covenants. They constitute His call for education and establish the purpose and process of our **learning**:

“I **give** unto you a commandment that ye shall continue in prayer and fasting from this time forth.

“And I give unto you a commandment that you shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom.

“Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand;

“Of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms—

“That ye may be prepared in all things when I shall send you again to magnify the calling whereunto I have called you, and the mission with which I have commissioned you”  
**(D&C 88:76–80).**

Let’s start with the purpose of our learning. The Lord and His Church have always encouraged education to increase our ability to serve Him and our Heavenly Father’s children. For each of us, whatever our talents, He has service for us to give. And to do it well always involves learning, not once or for a limited time, but continually.

In the scripture above, the Master is clear about the process. Through prayer, fasting, and hard work, with a motive to serve Him, we can expect His grace to attend us. I can assure you from my own experience, that does not mean we will always be on the high end of the grading curve. It means that we will learn more rapidly and grow in skill beyond what we could do only with our unaided natural abilities.

That leads to some clear answers to the question of what all this means for us and what, therefore, we should do.

### **Spiritual Learning Gives Purpose to Secular Learning**

It is clear that our first priority should go to spiritual learning. For us, reading the scriptures would come before reading history books. Prayer would come before memorizing those Spanish verbs. A temple recommend would be worth more to us than standing first in our graduating class. But it is also clear that spiritual learning would not replace our drive for secular learning.

The Lord clearly values what you will find in that history book and in a text on political theory. Remember His words. He wants you to know “things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations” (D&C 88:79). And He favors not only Spanish verbs but the study of geography and demography. You remember that His educational charter requires that we have “a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms” (D&C 88:79). There is also an endorsement for questions we study in the sciences. It is clear that putting spiritual learning first does not relieve us from learning secular things. On the contrary, it gives our secular learning purpose and motivates us to work harder at it.

If we will keep spiritual learning in its proper place, we will have to make some hard choices of how we use our time. But there should never be a conscious choice to let the spiritual become secondary as a pattern in our lives. Never. That will lead to tragedy. The tragedy may not be obvious at first, nor may it ever be clear in mortal life. But remember, you are interested in education, not just for mortal life but for eternal life. When you see that reality clearly with spiritual sight, you will put spiritual learning first and yet not slight the secular learning. In fact, you will work harder at your secular learning than you would without that spiritual vision.

### **God Knows What We Need to Know**

Part of the tragedy you must avoid is to discover too late that you missed an opportunity to prepare for a future only God could see for you. The chance to learn another language is for me a painful example. My father was born in Mexico. He grew up speaking Spanish as his first language. I lived in his home for more than 20 years. Sadly, I never asked him to teach me a word of Spanish. Now I am the first contact in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles for the Church in Mexico, in Central America, and in Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador. It was no accident that I was born into a home with a Spanish-speaking father.

But there was another opportunity. My father was a great teacher. He was a chemist. He even kept a blackboard in our basement for his children. He was eager to teach me mathematics. He spent hours trying to help me solve problems for my physics classes. He pled with me to think more often about those things that then seemed so uninteresting and so unimportant. Years later I was called by the Lord to the Presiding Bishopric of the Church and given responsibilities for computing and communications systems. What a blessing I might have had by taking the counsel I give you now.

Your life is carefully watched over, as was mine. The Lord knows both what He will need you to do and what you will need to know. He is kind and He is all-knowing. So you can with confidence expect that He has prepared opportunities for you to learn in preparation for the service you will give. You will not recognize those opportunities perfectly, as I did not. But when you put the spiritual things first in your life, you will be blessed to feel directed toward certain learning, and you will be motivated to work

harder. You will recognize later that your power to serve was increased, and you will be grateful.

Your service may not be in what the world would recognize as a lofty calling. When the real value of service becomes clear in the judgment of God, some people who worked in quiet anonymity will be the real heroes. Many of them, perhaps most of them, will be the underpaid and underrecognized people who nurtured others. I never visit an elementary school and watch the teachers without thinking about that future day when the rewards will be eternal. I never visit a hospital and watch those who nurse and those who clean without thinking of that. I never visit a workplace where someone serves me and others well, earning wages barely enough to provide the necessities for a family, without thinking of the future. And I never see a mother juggling three little children who are crying while she is smiling, as she shepherds them gently, without seeing in my mind's eye that day of honor in the presence of the only Judge whose praise will finally matter.

### **Learning Should Never Stop**

No service that matters can be given over a lifetime by those who stop learning. A great teacher is always studying. A nurse never stops facing the challenge of dealing with something new, be it equipment or procedure. And the workplace in every industry is changing so rapidly that what we know today will not be enough for tomorrow.

Our education must never stop. If it ends at the door of the classroom on graduation day, we will fail. And since what we will need to know is hard to discern, we need the help of heaven to know which of the myriad things we could study we would most wisely learn. It also means that we cannot waste time entertaining ourselves when we have the chance to read or to listen to whatever will help us learn what is true and useful. Insatiable curiosity will be our hallmark.

For many of us, the feeling bears down on us that we must choose between spiritual and secular learning. That is a false conflict for most of us, particularly for the young. Before we have families, there is leisure time even in what is our busiest day. Too often we use many hours for fun and pleasure, clothed in the euphemism "I'm recharging my batteries." Those hours could be spent reading and studying to gain knowledge, skills, and culture.

For instance, we too often fail to take advantage of the moments we spend waiting. Think of the last time you sat in a barber shop or a beauty salon or the waiting room of a doctor's office. It is so easy to spend time thumbing through any magazine that is stacked on a table there. In fact, if you think about it, you will remember how you wondered where they get those out-of-date magazines. There is much valuable reading you could do if you took a book with you to fill those islands of time.

From at least the time man was created, there was the written word. The scriptures tell us that from what they teach about Adam and Eve. They were conscious of the need to develop the mind and the power of reading and writing. In the book of Moses we read,

“And by them their children were taught to read and write, having a language which was pure and undefiled” (**Moses 6:6**).

It takes neither modern technology nor much money to seize the opportunity to learn in the moments we now waste. You could just have a book and paper and pencil with you. That will be enough. But you need determination to capture the leisure moments you now waste.

### **God Can Multiply the Effectiveness of Our Time**

I realize that there are some, perhaps many, for whom my urging to capture leisure time cuts like a knife. You feel overwhelmed by the lack of time. You have left unfinished tasks in your Church calling. You’ve carried your scriptures all day but still have not found a moment to open them. There is someone in your family who would be blessed by your thoughtful attention, but you haven’t gotten to them yet. You will go to a job tomorrow that barely pays enough to keep food on your table and pay your bills. Rather than finding ways to capture leisure time for learning, you are trying to decide what to leave undone.

There is another way to look at your problem of crowded time. You can see it as an opportunity to test your faith. The Lord loves you and watches over you. He is all-powerful, and He promised you this: “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (**Matt. 6:33**).

That is a true promise. When we put God’s purposes first, He will give us miracles. If we pray to know what He would have us do next, He will multiply the effects of what we do in such a way that time seems to be expanded. He may do it in different ways for each individual, but I know from long experience that He is faithful to His word.

Years ago I was admitted to a graduate program for which I was poorly prepared. The course was arduous. The competition was fierce. On the first day the professor said, “Look at the person on your left and on your right. One of the three of you will not be here at the end. One of the three of you will likely fail.” The schedule of classes filled the five weekdays from early until late. Preparations for the next day’s classes lasted until nearly midnight, often beyond. And then late on Friday a major paper was assigned, with no way to prepare until the assignment was given and with the paper due at nine o’clock on Saturday night.

I can still remember the hours of frantic study and writing on those Saturdays. And as the nine o’clock deadline approached, crowds of students would stand around the slot in the wall of the library to cheer as the last desperate student would dash up to throw in his completed paper, just before the box inside the building was pulled away from beneath the slot to let the late papers fall into the oblivion of failure. Then the students would go back to their homes and to their rooms for a few hours of celebration before starting preparations for Monday classes. And most of them would study all day on Sunday and late into the night.

For me, there was no party on Saturday and no studying on Sunday. The Lord gave me an opportunity to test His promise. Early in that year He called me, through a humble district president, to a Church service that took me across the hills of New England from the early hours of Sunday to late in the evening. I visited the tiny branches and the scattered Latter-day Saints from Newport and Cape Cod on the south to Worcester and Fort Devens on the west and Lynn and Georgetown on the north. I realize that those names mean more to me than they do to you. For me the words bring back the joy of going to those places, loving the Lord, and trusting that somehow He would keep His promise. He always did. In the few minutes I could give to preparation on Monday morning before classes, ideas and understanding came to more than match what others gained from a Sunday of study.

I've seen that same miracle when there seemed not to be enough time for my family when they needed me. I had four young sons and a challenging new job, and then came a call from our bishop to be the assistant Scoutmaster and the deacons quorum instructor. The Scouts camped out often, taking me from my boys, who were either older or younger than Scout ages. But I gave my heart to teaching and serving, trusting the Lord's promise. I began to take one of my sons and then another with me on our outings. What seemed a call away from my obligations to my sons, with the Lord's help, formed a bond with them that will last for eternity. I gave my heart to the Lord's service in that deacons quorum; He gave me the hearts of my sons.

I cannot promise academic success or perfect families. Nor can I tell you the way in which He will honor His promise of adding blessings upon you. But I can promise you that if you will go to Him in prayer and ask what He would have you do next, promising that you will put His kingdom first, He will answer your prayer and He will keep His promise to add upon your head blessings, enough and to spare. Those apparent prison walls of "not enough time" will begin to recede, even as you are called to do more.

### **Real Life Is Eternal Life**

The real life we're preparing for is eternal life. Secular knowledge has for us eternal significance. Our conviction is that God, our Heavenly Father, wants us to live the life that He does. We learn both the spiritual things and the secular things "so we may one day create worlds [and] people and govern them" (Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball [1982], 386). All we can learn that is true while we are in this life will rise with us in the Resurrection. And all that we can learn will enhance our capacity to serve. That is a destiny reserved not alone for the brilliant, those who learn the most quickly, or those who enter the most respected professions. It will be given to those who are humbly good, who love God, and who serve Him with all their capacities, however limited those capacities are—as are all our capacities, compared with the capacities of God.

I pray that you will feel a debt of gratitude to the Master Teacher, our Savior Jesus Christ. I pray that you will sense the great service that a loving Heavenly Father expects you to

give to His children and that you will see the opportunities to learn that He has prepared for you.

*Gospel topics: education, service, testimony, time management*

**Let's Talk about It**

*Most Ensign articles can be used for family home evening discussions. The following questions are for that purpose or for personal reflection:*

1. Why does conversion to the gospel often result in an increased desire for education?
2. How can we better recognize opportunities to learn that the Lord has provided for us?
3. How can we devote more time to studying and learning? For example, do we take advantage of the moments we spend waiting?

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