

Thriving Spiritually

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This past year I was invited to join a group of faculty and administrators asking what it means for students to thrive and how we might better promote such thriving here at BYU.¹ We discussed academic engagement, social connectedness, good citizenship, and other important topics. Of greatest interest to me, and the topic I was specifically tasked to consider, was what it means to thrive spiritually.

Spirituality is a favorite subject of mine. Like most people at BYU, I am a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a religion that emphasizes the importance of a strong and nourishing spiritual life. In recent years I have begun thinking more intently about the aims of a BYU education, particularly the one stipulating that our experiences at this university should be “spiritually strengthening.”² I ask myself what this means relative to the classes I teach, and I ask my students what it means relative to the classes they take. Much of my scholarly work these days addresses diverse

aspects of spiritual life in literary and intellectual history, and I now teach a seminar in the English Department titled Literature and Spiritual Experience. I love exploring this subject with my students; they are so smart, so insightful about spiritual things.

So I put these questions to those of you reading: What does spiritual thriving mean to you? And how would you say you are doing?

What Does It Mean to Thrive Spiritually?

In answering that first question for myself, I am mindful of President Russell M. Nelson’s oft-cited observation that “in coming days, it will not be possible to survive spiritually without the guiding, directing, comforting, and constant influence of the Holy Ghost.”³ By that measure, we might say that we survive and even thrive spiritually to the extent that we habitually seek and enjoy spiritual experiences—that we invite, treasure, and learn from the Spirit of God. These are experiences of a very unique kind.

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The English poet William Blake once wondered whether it was possible to see the world in a grain of sand, to discern in even the tiniest particles the vast array of forces that make things what they are.⁴ In their way, spiritual experiences are such miraculous particles, enabling us to glimpse the vastness of God’s plan of salvation. Think about it: to have any experience with the Spirit of God is to experience at least three realities—first, that God lives; second, that our lives have a purpose (a purpose for God to reach out to us); and third, that Christ’s Atonement is operative in our lives, bringing us back at least partly into God’s presence. To feel the Spirit, even in subtle ways or about seemingly small things, is to open a window onto eternity.

For this reason, spiritual experiences are among life’s richest, profoundest, most exquisitely meaningful, most empowering, enlightening, and life-giving phenomena. In our religious culture we often speak about how the Spirit testifies of truth and prompts us to do what is right. Additionally, spiritual experiences draw us to what is sacred, meaningful, and whole. As such, they foster healing, sharpen our minds, enliven our perceptions, deepen our empathy, and increase our care for all of creation. Spiritual experiences fill us with hope and purpose, wisdom and understanding; they motivate and console. Over time, their effect is transformative, helping us become greater, more fully realized versions of ourselves.

Becoming Aware of Our Spiritual Experiences

In the seminar I teach on spiritual experience and literature, the students and I instruct each other on how to recognize ways that poems and novels give expression to spiritual things. This requires us to learn about what spirituality means in academic as well as scriptural terms. On top of familiar religious phrases like “burning in the bosom” (see D&C 9:8) and “stupor of thought” (D&C 9:9), we acquire new language about, for example, “neurocognitive intensification,” “the interconnectedness of thought and feeling,” and “concern for matters of ultimate value.” As we expand our spiritual vocabularies and quicken our perception of what spiritual impressions are and how they work, we come to understand more

completely how the Spirit informs others’ lives and, hopefully, our own.

As an exercise, I ask students to keep journals taking note of their spiritual impressions—when and how they occur and how they respond. One student, Moe Gravier, gave me permission to share a portion of her journal. She recorded a set of spiritual impressions she had received shortly before a large assignment was due in another class. She was visiting her family and woke up in the morning eager to get to work but felt distinct spiritual impressions to do things a little differently: to go back to sleep and get a little more rest, to take time to pray and read her scriptures, and to spend time with her family. As the day progressed, she began to worry: If these were spiritual impressions she was receiving, did the Spirit want her to get a bad grade on her big assignment? Was the Lord trying to humble her? I quote here from her account:

I determined whether an impression was coming from the Spirit based on whether it felt peaceful or led in the way of peace. So when my sister wanted to go for a run, I went. When my mom needed help in the basement, I helped—and I wondered how in the world I was going to get my assignment done. But I kept feeling an extraordinary, counterintuitive peace—like the Lord was showing me how I could live life in a state of calm instead of panic. Of course, by the end of the day, the Lord blessed my mind with ideas and energy to get done all I needed to. In reflecting on this experience, I began to wonder if this is what it’s like to actually live under the influence of the Spirit—to live calmly, doing the right things at the right moments, and getting things done with joy and peace instead of stress. And I honestly began to wonder if I had done it all wrong these last four years of college and what things would have been like if I had been intentionally living each day like this. I wondered if I could have saved myself a lot of stress and hopelessness and why I didn’t trust the whole time.⁵

I am inspired by my student’s account. To elaborate on her insights, what if we sought the presence of the Spirit a little more intentionally? What if we trained ourselves to be more aware of how the Spirit communicates with us, and what if we made it a habit to heed its promptings? What if we were more mindful of cultivating the

companionship of the Holy Ghost even when we weren't seeking answers to urgent questions? Would we feel more connected to God and each other, and would we live a little more like the people we want to be?

Parley P. Pratt, an early leader of the restored Church, sure believed so. He wrote in 1855:

The gift of the Holy Ghost . . . quickens all the intellectual faculties, increases, enlarges, expands and purifies all the natural passions and affections; and adapts them, by the gift of wisdom, to their lawful use. It inspires, develops, cultivates and matures all the fine-toned sympathies, joys, tastes, kindred feelings and affections of our nature. It inspires virtue, kindness, goodness, tenderness, gentleness and charity. It develops beauty of person, form and features. It tends to health, vigor, animation and social feeling. . . . In short, it is, as it were, marrow to the bone, joy to the heart, light to the eyes, music to the ears, and life to the whole being.⁶

The message here is that the Spirit's influence extends to all areas of life: physical, mental, emotional, social, and more. Its inspiration is not limited to providing direction or confirming truth, and it can expand our capacities to learn and think, to create and enjoy. The Spirit deepens our experience and thus helps us build relationships, heighten our awareness of life's richness and diversity, and discern more intensely the beauty of things to which we might otherwise be dulled.

Recognizing and Valuing Our Spiritual Gifts

So how do we access the Spirit more fully? My student's practice was to take careful note of how the Spirit moves her and then discipline herself to respond to its promptings. Many people, though, are unsure of how to judge their own spiritual impressions. Recently, a friend reached out to me wanting to know whether I thought she should speak out about something that had been bothering her. She happened to contact me as I was writing this talk, so I asked her whether she had sought the Spirit to know what to do. She said that she had tried but that she sometimes felt confused as to whether her inspiration came from God or herself. I wondered whether my friend and God

might work more seamlessly together rather than in opposition, so I asked her instead about her spiritual gifts. What are they? And might they serve as conduits for her to receive inspiration? She shared three of her gifts: discernment, love, and forgiveness. I replied that perhaps these beautiful gifts directed her not to the question of whether she should speak but how—that perhaps addressing the situation that was bothering her in a discerning, loving, and forgiving way would allow the Spirit to communicate *with* and also *through* her. This small suggestion that she trust her own spiritual gifts seemed to open in her a channel of inspiration and increase her spiritual confidence.⁷

Spiritual gifts are precious because they are traces in us of our divine natures, aspects of ourselves in which we more fully reflect our Heavenly Parents. We read in scripture that “there are diversities of gifts” (1 Corinthians 12:4) and that to each of us “is given a gift” (D&C 46:11), or perhaps several gifts. A few passages of scripture list specific spiritual gifts—of knowledge, faith, wisdom, and more—though the potential list of such gifts is virtually endless. I have seen before how drawing on these unique gifts can bring us closer to God, perhaps because they call on parts of ourselves that are closer to God already.

Many years ago I taught a prep course for English majors thinking about pursuing PhDs. One exceptionally gifted student, smart and diversely talented, completed the class requirements but seemed more interested in pursuing other opportunities. Several years later she contacted me and asked if we could talk. I invited her to my home and learned that she had gotten married, found herself living in places she hadn't anticipated, and no longer felt as assured about following a lifelong career dream. She had explored other options, and nothing seemed right, so she was revisiting her original decision to not pursue a PhD. We began talking again about some of the items we had discussed in our prep class years before: the parts of a graduate school application, what kind of writing sample to use, what to emphasize in a letter of intent, and so forth. She diligently took a few notes. But I could sense in her feelings of uncertainty and unhappiness. Then

the Spirit impressed me with a new thought. I told her not to worry about career tracks for a moment and reflect instead on her spiritual gifts. If she thought about pursuing a life most in keeping with those gifts, what kind of life would that be? The mood in the room instantly changed; she said she hadn't thought about approaching her future with that question in mind. Later in the week, she sent me a note informing me that she had taken the question to heart, had found new clarity in her thinking, and now discerned a life and career path that seemed well-suited to her. Anxiety had given way to joy.

If we learn to let Him, the Lord through the Spirit can animate all facets of our lives. But seeking the Spirit as our guide can feel a little daunting, at least until we remember that we are cocreators with God—cocreators of our lives and the world around us. While we do confront matters of right *or* wrong and truth *or* falsehood, and while it is vital to seek the Spirit's confirmation regarding such things, most inspiration is less absolute in nature. Rather, it tends to be broader and more open-ended: What moves you, or what *might* move you? What might you learn, and how might you learn it? What talents, traits, and virtues might you cultivate? What in our world might be better because of your involvement? In these and so many other areas, the Spirit is a creative partner who can help us fashion better ways to live and be. For every occasion when the Spirit helps us narrow our choices, there are many others when the Spirit assists us in multiplying them. The Spirit offers guidance, and that guidance is usually liberating.

Discerning the Spirit in Times of Trial

What, then, about those seasons of life when we may feel far from God or when our spiritual lives feel vexed by questions, even crises? For some people—or, better said, for most of us at least some of the time—the difficult parts of our lives can feel overwhelming. What does it mean to thrive spiritually when we feel weighed down by illness, grief, unkindness, loneliness, discrimination, anxiety, depression, abuse, trauma, rejection, disappointment, or numerous other hardships? For any who shoulder such burdens, spiritual

reassurance alone may not seem like much of a remedy. But if we continue to seek the Spirit's presence even in difficult circumstances, and if we are mindful of what we discern in that miraculous grain of sand, we may find that God and relief are closer than we think.

In 2009, I was offered a job teaching Scottish literature at a university in Scotland. I was thrilled by the opportunity but uncertain as to whether I wanted to leave BYU permanently or move my family out of the United States. So BYU generously allowed me to accept that position on a half-time basis, and for a couple of years, my wife, daughters, and I divided our time between Utah and Aberdeen, a beautiful Scottish city on the North Sea. While we loved the diversity of our experience and so many of the people we met in Scotland, we knew we couldn't sustain a split existence, so we began pondering where to settle long-term. I thought exhaustively through our options and also sought guidance in prayer. And for a long time—weeks, then months—I received no answer. Or rather, I felt inspiration but no confirmation, no clear impressions to stay or go. Instead, I felt directed to wait and reflect on reasons why I might choose one path or the other, examining less *what I should do* and more *the person I would be* in making the decision. It was an important exercise, but my uncertainty persisted. And I was beginning to grow anxious.

I was at this place in life on the second-to-last Sunday of March 2012 when my ward's priesthood quorum leader announced that the following week a man from our neighborhood, a lifelong member of the Church now in his eighties, would be attending our services for the first time in more than fifty years. "When you see him," the leader encouraged us, "say hello; make him feel welcome." Fair enough, I thought, though it didn't seem like anybody in our friendly group would need such encouragement.

The following week, the last Sunday of March, this man, Jerry, joined us for priesthood meeting. I liked him instantly: he carried an air of understated elegance and stood and introduced himself in a soft, plainspoken voice. When the meeting adjourned, I stepped into the hallway for a couple of minutes. Sunday School, our next meeting, was

held in the same room. When I returned, there was an open seat next to Jerry, so I took it and extended my hand.

I have forgotten the topic of our Sunday School lesson that day. I remember, though, that it was based on the Book of Mormon, and all Jerry had was an old Bible. So, as the teacher moved through the lesson, I opened my scriptures so that Jerry could follow along.

When the class ended, people began filing to the chapel for sacrament meeting. But Jerry remained slumped in his chair, staring at the floor. I stayed there with him.

“Everything alright?”

He blinked a couple times, formulating a thought. What he finally emitted was dour. “That discussion went over my head. Everyone here knows so much about the gospel and I know so little. I feel like I’ve wasted my life. I should never have come back.”

His words landed like a gut punch. Out of nowhere, I found myself in a crisis moment not of my own life but someone else’s, and I was completely unqualified to assess it. I did not know this man and was roughly half his age; my aim in sitting beside him had simply been to convey the welcoming spirit of our ward community. If he had said he didn’t understand a particular gospel principle, I might have filled in some gaps; if he had asked whether ward members socialized much outside church, I might have invited him over for dinner. What I was *not* equipped to deliver was judgment on the meaning of his life—on where it had been wasted and where it had been well spent.

But the occasion called for a substantive reply and for an understanding of this man and his circumstances that I simply did not possess. So I sat still: one second, two seconds, three—praying silently to know what to say. And then, like a lightning flash, a thought burst into my mind.

I tapped his Bible. “When you get home today, I want you to open to Matthew 20. There’s a parable there about laborers in a vineyard. The Lord calls some workers early, some a little later, some later and then later still, and some at the last hour of the day. But if they go to work for him, he pays them all the same wage. The message is that it’s

never too late for us to respond to God. In His eyes, we’re never too late.”

Jerry’s brow softened a little. “I like the sound of that.”

“I like it, too, and I believe it’s true. So today, after you get home, read that parable. And then, the next time we’re here at church, I want you to tell me what your impressions were as you read it.”

“Yeah, okay,” he pledged. “I can do that.”

The following week, the first Sunday of April, we didn’t hold meetings at our ward, as it was general conference, televised globally across the entire Church. One of the talks that weekend struck me with particular force. It was Elder Jeffrey R. Holland’s, and it was titled “The Laborers in the Vineyard.” Elder Holland expounded on that parable from Matthew 20 and then expressed this beautiful thought:

*I do not know who in this vast audience today may need to hear the message of forgiveness inherent in this parable, but however late you think you are, however many chances you think you have missed, however many mistakes you feel you have made or talents you think you don’t have, or however far from home and family and God you feel you have traveled, I testify that you have **not** traveled beyond the reach of divine love. It is not possible for you to sink lower than the infinite light of Christ’s Atonement shines.⁸*

The Sunday after general conference, back at our ward building, Jerry found me. “Hey, did you hear Elder Holland?” he asked. “He spoke about that parable!” It was a message, Jerry felt, intended directly for him. He became a vital member of our ward: beloved of the regulars, a minister to those on the margins, and a pilgrim to temples in several western states. Meanwhile, our family eventually received our answer as to where we were best planted. I stayed at BYU and some three years later accepted a church calling requiring me to pay regular visits to wards across our stake. As it happens, one of these wards was Elder Holland’s, and I would sometimes find myself seated beside him on the stand. One day, a couple years into my assignment, I told him the story about the impact his talk had made on

Jerry. He smiled and invoked a theatrical metaphor. “You seek inspiration to know what to say,” he remarked, “but you don’t always see heaven working in the wings.”

Heaven Working in the Wings

As I have thought about that experience over the years, I have reflected on the idea that we don’t always see heaven working in the wings. Elder Holland didn’t see it in the life of one man out of the immense throng of people to whom he had spoken at general conference. Jerry didn’t see it at first in the difficult decision to return to church after a long absence. And I didn’t see it as I brooded week after week over my own big life decision, the heavens revealing little as I pleaded to know whether to stay at BYU or move overseas.

As it turns out, my experience in seeking the Spirit was much like the one shared by my student who wrote about the Spirit’s brilliantly counter-intuitive inspiration. I had been seeking a concrete answer to prayer, and when one finally came to me, it had nothing to do with where I should work or where my family and I should live, but instead it was about something altogether different—a kind and earnest older man’s regrets over lost time. Regarding my own question, it would soon become clear to me why I had needed to wait for an answer: There was still a missing piece of the puzzle I could not have foreseen, and I also needed time to reflect on my priorities so that when I had to make a difficult decision, I could do so with greater self-understanding. And, as the story with Jerry illustrates, the Lord had His own ways of making sure I understood He was still there.

We can’t always see heaven working on our behalf, but any experience with the Spirit, no matter how small, is evidence that God is doing just that. Forget for a moment receiving some great answer to prayer. Have you felt the Spirit even a little as you have *sought* the Lord in prayer? Have you felt the Spirit convey to you that God loves you, or that He understands you, or that He has great hopes for you, or that He sorrows with you, or that He rejoices with you, or that He appreciates your gratitude to Him or your kind deed for someone else? Have you felt the Spirit open your

mind to help you learn something new, or turn you to something good, or inspire you to perceive something beautiful, or reassure you that things will be okay, that you aren’t lost, that God knows exactly where you are? If you have ever had any of these experiences or myriad others like them, you have effectively experienced our Father’s plan of salvation in a grain of sand. That is, as I mentioned earlier, you have been shown that God is real, that your life has a purpose—that there is a reason God reached out to you through His Spirit—and that Christ’s Atonement is making it possible for you to feel God’s presence a little more fully.

What does spiritual thriving mean to me? Very simply, it means seeking, recognizing, and enjoying experiences with the Spirit of God. It means being mindful of the breadth of ways the Spirit moves us and then being responsive to its inspiration, perhaps by drawing on our unique spiritual gifts and perhaps by learning to perceive God’s presence even when we are preoccupied with other concerns.

So how are you doing? Would you say you are thriving spiritually? My conviction is that if you have experiences with the Spirit, even ones that are only still and small, then God is choosing to abide with you. Therefore, despite any cares and questions you may have, you are probably doing very well indeed. Meanwhile, if you are disheartened about all the spiritual experiences you feel you *don’t* have, then I would say to you what the Lord once communicated to my friend Jerry, which is that in God’s eyes, you are probably doing a lot better than you think you are. God knows and loves you, and He hasn’t forgotten about you. You can’t “sink lower than the infinite light of Christ’s Atonement shines.” And we don’t always see heaven working in the wings. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. I thank John R. Rosenberg, BYU associate academic vice president of undergraduate studies and the leader of this group, for inviting me to join the conversation.

2. *The Aims of a BYU Education* (1 March 1995).

3. Russell M. Nelson, "Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives," *Ensign*, May 2018.

4. William Blake's poem "Auguries of Innocence" (ca. 1803) opens this way:

*To see a world in a grain of sand
And a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.*

His point is that we potentially behold what is great in what is small.

5. Moe Graviet, "Spiritual Exercises Portfolio," April 2020; cited with permission.

6. Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 101.

7. "Spiritual confidence" is John Rosenberg's phrase for the spiritual facet of BYU's ThrYve initiative. He in turn takes the phrase from Doctrine and Covenants 121:45: "Then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God."

8. Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Laborers in the Vineyard," *Ensign*, May 2012; emphasis in original; see also Matthew 20.