

Christlike Transformation

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Just a few weeks ago our campus community gathered here in the Marriott Center to celebrate commencement for our graduates. This arena was filled with family, friends, faculty, staff, and administration, all of whom came together to recognize and applaud the accomplishments of our graduates. The event was inspiring and uplifting, the culminating event of many years of hard work, commitment, and dedication. As I attended this event, I couldn't help but reflect on my own educational journey and how far I have come since my early years of schooling.

From a young age, I developed a love of reading and learning, and I set the ambitious goal of graduating from a university. However, as the first person in my family to pursue higher education, I wasn't entirely sure what it would take to achieve my goal. So to increase my chances of success, I developed an educational game plan: attend class, do my homework, and get good grades.

As an example of my commitment, in my first semester of junior high I signed up for a typing

class and, wanting to practice at home to become more proficient, I immediately put a typewriter on my Christmas wish list. Some of you don't even know what a typewriter is, but in 1989 it was cutting-edge technology. It had a sixteen-character LCD display *and* built-in correction tape. I was so excited about my typewriter that the following March, for my birthday, I asked for a filing cabinet. You know, to file all the things I was going to type.

Now, my kids give me a hard time about these gift requests. Who asks for typewriters and filing cabinets in junior high—or ever?

They can laugh all they want, but those gifts were significant to me because they helped forge my identity as a responsible, organized, and committed student. I found great satisfaction in seeing my hard work and commitment translate into good grades. School felt like a natural extension of myself.

My educational game plan got me through junior high and then high school. Finally, after graduating from high school with the highest

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of honors, I used my treasured typewriter to type up my application to attend Southern Utah University.

I was excited and nervous to attend SUU. I was thrilled to be one step closer to achieving my goal, but I also had real concerns about my ability to succeed at the college level. As a first-generation college student, I found it challenging to navigate the system. I always felt a step or two behind my peers. But I stuck to the plan: attend class, do my homework, and get good grades. And the plan continued working! Right up until I transferred into BYU's accounting program.

In Romans we read, "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed."¹ Transformational experiences can be uncomfortable and challenging, but they are essential for our growth and development. I didn't know it at the time, but transferring to BYU would teach me a lot about the process of transformation. Today I would like to share some memories and feelings from the time I was an undergraduate student here at BYU because I suspect many of you are in the rocky middle of your own transformational experiences. I hope that what I share today will help you recognize the importance of these experiences in shaping who you will become.

The Purpose of Our Mortal Transformation

BYU's unique mission "is to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life."² The university accomplishes this through "a period of intensive learning in a stimulating setting where a commitment to excellence is expected and the full realization of human potential is pursued."³ With this mission in mind, a BYU education aims to be "(1) spiritually strengthening, (2) intellectually enlarging, and (3) character building, leading to (4) lifelong learning and service."⁴ This is not just the path to a college degree but a blueprint for considerable personal transformation!

Why does BYU aim to help its students transform so completely—not just intellectually but in spirit, character, and service too? We came to the earth for that very purpose! To transform. To gain a body and have experiences that will help us progress and become more like our Savior, Jesus Christ. If we exercise our agency and choose

to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, we are told, "A new heart also will I give you. . . . and I will put my spirit within you, . . . And ye shall be my people, and I will be your God."⁵

We all want to feel of God's spirit and love and be numbered as one of His people. However, it is easy to forget that this process of transformation and renewal requires struggle and sacrifice. To truly receive a new heart and spirit, we must be willing to experience opposition—we must let go of old habits and ways of thinking that hold us back from becoming the best versions of ourselves. Elder Neal A. Maxwell once asked:

How can you and I really expect to glide naively through life, as if to say, "Lord, give me experience, but not grief, not sorrow, not pain, not opposition, not betrayal, and certainly not to be forsaken. Keep from me, Lord, all those experiences which made Thee what Thou art! Then let me come and dwell with Thee and fully share Thy joy!"⁶

Throughout our lives, we will inevitably face difficult challenges, both great and small, that are intended to test our faith, character, and resilience. These experiences will help us become more like our Savior and prepare us for the eternal life to come, if we allow that. This is something I learned firsthand as a student in BYU's accounting junior core program.

Seeking Assistance in My Transformational Journey

As I walked into the accounting orientation that first day of class, the atmosphere felt tense, and I immediately felt myself struggling with feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. To cope with this apprehension, I relied on my academic game plan: attend class, do the homework, and get good grades.

This time, however, the plan didn't work. True to the university's aim of being intellectually enlarging, BYU's accounting program was providing a rigorous academic experience. Too rigorous for me. I was working harder than I ever had before and achieving below-average results. It seemed to me that my classroom was filled with exceptionally intelligent students who appeared to

effortlessly understand everything. Where had all these people come from? I had always considered myself a good student, but now I was second-guessing everything. I was constantly afraid that one of my peers would ask me, “How did you do on the quiz last night?” or “What was your score on the exam?” I tried to put in more time and effort, believing that I just wasn’t working hard enough. But nothing I did seemed to make a difference. The pace of the class was too fast and the material too complex. My worst fear was becoming a reality: I couldn’t succeed at this level. And if I didn’t succeed, if I wasn’t a good student, then *what was I?* What was my purpose in being here? Did I belong at BYU—or in college?

As my sense of self-worth was crumbling, I found myself losing touch with the most important aspect of my identity, which is child of God.⁷

After a particularly difficult day, I prayed fervently to my Heavenly Father about my situation, my insecurities, and my doubts. I felt so overwhelmed and tired, and there was no solution in sight. I remember ending my prayer saying, “I will never be as smart as so-and-so,” naming the student who sat next to me.

As I got off my knees and got into bed, the thought immediately came: *You’re right, you may never be as smart as so-and-so. But more important, you may never get the opportunity to sit next to and interact with this student again. If this is the smartest person you know, then why don’t you learn everything you can from him and those around you rather than comparing yourself to them? Take this opportunity to learn and grow.*

These thoughts were surprising to me. I was seeking comfort and reassurance, but instead I received a rebuke and a charge to change my focus. I had been focusing on all the things I couldn’t do rather than appreciating the people and opportunities that surrounded me. I became acutely aware of what we are told in the Doctrine and Covenants: “For all have not every gift given unto them; for there are many gifts. . . . To some is given one, and to some is given another.” The problem was that I had lost sight of the words that follow: “*that all may be profited thereby.*”⁸

What I needed was a shift in perspective. Comparison is pointless. God doesn’t compare us

to each other. Instead, he wants us to use our differences to bless and sustain one another. Rather than doing everything on my own and constantly comparing my weaknesses to the strengths of others, I needed to ask for help!

After a restless night, I gathered the courage to be vulnerable, and I confided the difficulties I was experiencing in the class to my peers. My group was surprised to hear that I was struggling, and they immediately offered their help. They exemplified counsel found in the Doctrine and Covenants: “Seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom. . . . that all may be edified of all.”⁹ I will always be grateful for my accounting junior core group. They were kind, patient, and generous with their knowledge, and they helped me find the joy in learning once again!

Remembering My True Identity Through Transformation

The transformation didn’t end there. I needed to seek learning, not only “by study [but] also by faith.”¹⁰

In Ether the Lord said:

*I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; . . . for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.*¹¹

Now look, I wasn’t quite saying, like Paul in Corinthians, “I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities,”¹² but I did recognize that I needed to access strength beyond my own. I needed to draw nearer to my Savior to feel of His love and be reminded of my divine identity and potential as a child of God. President M. Russell Ballard recently shared the importance of this truth with BYU students in a devotional:

First and foremost, you are and always will be a spirit child of God. . . .

. . . It is eternal truth. It is written in big, bold, capital letters. Understanding this truth—really understanding it and embracing it—is life changing. It gives you an extraordinary identity that no one can ever take away from you. But more than that, it should give you an enormous feeling of value and a sense of your infinite

worth. Finally, it provides you a divine, noble, and worthy purpose in life.¹³

As the year continued, I prioritized my spiritual growth by increasing my personal study of the scriptures and conference talks, and as I did so, I felt more confident in my worth. I was not only being intellectually enlarged by my experience at BYU but spiritually strengthened as well! Sunday became my favorite day of the week as I became more intentional about my worship, taking time to reflect on my progress and to renew my covenants. Accessing the Savior’s enabling power each week helped sustain me during that difficult time of growth and transformation.

As students, it is easy to believe your identity and self-worth are tied to outward indicators, such as your academic success, your dating life, or your job performance. The pressure to succeed and the fear of failure can quickly become overwhelming. I had mistakenly linked my sense of worth to my accomplishments or grades, allowing them to define me.

Sister Rosemary M. Wixom reminded us:

*Our divine nature has nothing to do with our personal accomplishments, the status we achieve, the number of marathons we run, or our popularity and self-esteem. Our divine nature comes from God. It was established in an existence that preceded our birth and [it] will continue on into eternity.*¹⁴

Navigating Your Own Transformation

My experience that first year at BYU was transformative. I was strengthened spiritually, my intellectual capacity increased, I gained a better understanding of my character and my divine potential, and I was committed to helping and serving others as they were doing the same for me. In short, I was experiencing the very transformation described in the university aims! But it is easy for me to stand back from the distance of twenty-six years and see how I was changed for the better by that experience. It can be much harder to see how you are changing when you are in the middle of the transformation process.

Consider the life cycle of a butterfly. It experiences a remarkable transformation that requires

a complete change in the insect’s form and function. A caterpillar will go through several stages of growth, shedding skin and forming a silky cocoon. Then, inside the cocoon, the caterpillar’s body breaks down completely into a liquid-like substance out of which a new body structure begins to form. In just nine to fourteen days, the transformation from caterpillar to butterfly is complete, and a beautiful, fully formed butterfly emerges.

Like a butterfly, we are here on earth to grow, change, and ultimately be reborn as a *perfected* being. “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”¹⁵ But the “cocoon phase” of transformation can be difficult because we cannot clearly see the glorious end result that awaits us. And unlike the butterfly, our transformation will take much longer than nine to fourteen days. It is a lifetime pursuit. The scriptures teach us that “in Christ [we become] new creature[s]: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”¹⁶ So how do we continue moving forward when we are in the process of becoming a new creature? When we cannot clearly see how our difficult experiences are changing us for the better, what can we do?

I share the following experience with the permission of my second son, Connor. Three years ago, Connor was serving as a missionary in El Salvador. Having been there for about a month, he was still trying to adjust to missionary life, a new language, and a foreign culture. During one of our Monday calls, I could immediately see that Connor was struggling. I tried to assure him that things would get better. Everyone says it takes three to four months to adjust—he just needed to keep working and be patient with himself and the process.

Connor nodded his head with tear-filled eyes and said, “I know, Mom. I know it will be better in a few months, but what do I do until then?”

Connor knew that time would pass and so would his circumstances, but how was he going to get through today and tomorrow until *then* arrived?

Many of us have the same kinds of questions: How do I get through today? This exam? This semester? How do I stay true to my testimony

when I am experiencing challenges, temptations, and doubts?

Even if I have faith and know that all will be well eventually, what can I do to get through today?

I didn't have an answer for Connor, and as a mother, I desperately wanted to fix everything. After quiet reflection, we started with the basics: "Connor, are you staying hydrated? Are you eating okay? Are you getting enough sleep?"

Students, if you are struggling, I would start with the same questions. Are you taking care of your body? Are you getting enough sleep? Are you remembering to stay connected to friends and family despite the pressures of school? If not, what little changes can you make *today* so that you are able to enjoy—not just endure—the experience you are having here at BYU?

Once those basics were addressed, Connor and our family prayed for inspiration to come to Connor to know what steps he could take each day to move forward. I also suggested Connor reach out to his mission president for additional support. So in his weekly letter to his mission president, Connor shared his feelings, outlined the steps he was taking to improve the situation, and asked for any additional advice his mission president might have to offer.

Now this transformation for Connor did not happen overnight, but, as expected, with enough time and experience, Connor acclimated to the culture, became fluent in the language, and finally began to feel that he was making a difference as a missionary.

Later, I asked Connor, "What helped you the most during this 'patiently waiting' period?"

He responded, "Three things."

The first was reading conference talks. Connor sought personal revelation and inspiration through the words of God's messengers. Elder Robert D. Hales taught, "If you pray with a sincere desire to hear your Heavenly Father's voice in the messages of . . . conference, you will discover that He has spoken to you."¹⁷

One talk in particular that spoke to Connor was a talk by President Nelson called "Joy and Spiritual Survival." Connor was trying to survive in a foreign country and he was lacking joy. In

this talk President Nelson stated, "The joy we feel has little to do with the circumstances of our lives and everything to do with the focus of our lives."¹⁸ Similar to my experience in the accounting junior core, Connor needed to shift his focus away from his own weaknesses and back toward the Savior's strength. This shift was a critical component for Connor's growth, happiness, and development.

Students, if you are not experiencing joy or if you feel as though you are just surviving, what can you do to shift your focus more toward Christ? President Nelson has counseled us, "As we seek to be disciples of Jesus Christ, our efforts to *hear Him* need to be ever more intentional."¹⁹ What intentional efforts can you make to better hear and understand promptings and reassurances from a loving Heavenly Father?

The second thing that helped Connor during this difficult time was talking with his older brother, Cameron. As someone who had already served a mission, Cameron empathized with the challenges Connor was facing and provided him with the reassurance, support, and guidance he needed. Just as I sought help from my group in the junior core, Connor sought help and comfort from his older brother.

When you are experiencing the pains of transformation, seeking help from loved ones can be a powerful balm. Friends, family, faculty, peers—they can all offer encouragement and help us feel less alone. It is *also* important to seek the expertise of professionals, such as therapists and counselors, as they can offer specialized support that can help us work through our difficulties. We were never meant to endure the pain of transformational experiences on our own. Is there someone you can reach out to for additional support? Can you reach out to someone to provide them support?

The third thing that helped Connor was a visit from his mission president. After receiving Connor's letter, the mission president acted on inspiration and rearranged his schedule to be in Connor's ward the following Sunday. This visit was significant to Connor because he was confusing the setbacks and difficulties he was experiencing on his mission with doing something wrong or not being good enough. This dear mission president embraced Connor and reassured him that he was

doing exactly what he was supposed to be doing. He embraced Connor when I couldn't, which was another answer to prayers—*my* prayers.

Faculty, staff, and administrators, are we striving to be like Connor's mission president, embracing our students by seeking inspiration to know how to best serve, love, and encourage them? As a student, I frequently sought help from faculty members. Their unwavering support and encouragement helped me see the potential that I was not able to recognize in myself. Our role goes beyond imparting knowledge and skills; we can be a source of support and inspiration for our students, helping them recognize their strengths, talents, and incredible worth as children of God. We have the great opportunity to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life!

Students, if you are struggling, please know that you are experiencing the transformational experiences of mortal life. You *are* good enough, and with the support of peers, friends, family, teachers, leaders, and especially your Heavenly Father, you will come out of your difficult times having changed for the better.

Finding Strength in the Savior's Transformational Power

My challenging experiences as a student here at BYU led me toward a deeper understanding of my purpose, potential, and identity as a disciple of Jesus Christ and a child of God. I hope your experiences here will do the same for each of you!

A BYU education is meant to transform you completely—to help you become more like our Savior, Jesus Christ. As you navigate the ups and downs of transformational experiences, you can turn to our Savior for guidance and support.

Elder Holland emphasized that

*Christ walked the path every mortal is called to walk so that he would know how to succor and strengthen us in our most difficult times. He knows the deepest and most personal burdens we carry. He knows the most public and poignant pains we bear. He descended below all such grief in order that he might lift us above it. There is no anguish or sorrow or sadness in life that he has not suffered in our behalf and borne away upon his own valiant and compassionate shoulders.*²⁰

When we are in the midst of transformation, we may feel as if we are being broken down—much like the butterfly in its cocoon—but the Savior will help build us up again and make us new creatures, if we let him.

President Nelson said:

*God so loved the world that He sent His Only Begotten Son to help us. And His Son, Jesus Christ, gave His life for us. All so that we could have access to godly power—power sufficient to deal with the burdens, obstacles, and temptations of our day.*²¹

By relying on the strength and comfort that our Savior offers us, we can move through transformational experiences with greater patience, peace, and confidence. The Savior assured us, “In me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”²²

I bear testimony that Jesus Christ overcame the world through His atoning sacrifice. I seek the Savior, I love Him, I am His disciple. The Savior gives me strength beyond my own, and through my efforts to become more like Him, I have found hope, peace, and lasting joy. I bear this testimony of Him in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Romans 12:2.
2. The Mission of Brigham Young University (4 November 1981).
3. Mission of Brigham Young University.
4. The Aims of a BYU Education (1 March 1995).
5. Ezekiel 36:26–28.
6. Neal A. Maxwell, “Lest Ye Be Wearied and Faint in Your Minds,” *Ensign*, May 1991.
7. See Russell M. Nelson, “Choices for Eternity,” worldwide devotional for young adults, 15 May 2022, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson.
8. Doctrine and Covenants 46:11–12; emphasis added.
9. Doctrine and Covenants 88:118, 122.
10. Doctrine and Covenants 88:118.
11. Ether 12:27; emphasis added.
12. 2 Corinthians 12:10.

13. M. Russell Ballard, "Children of Heavenly Father," BYU devotional address, 3 March 2020.

14. Rosemary M. Wixom, "Discovering the Divinity Within," *Ensign*, November 2015.

15. John 3:3.

16. 2 Corinthians 5:17.

17. Robert D. Hales, "General Conference: Strengthening Faith and Testimony," *Ensign*, November 2013.

18. Russell M. Nelson, "Joy and Spiritual Survival," *Ensign*, November 2016.

19. Russell M. Nelson, "Hear Him," *Ensign*, May 2020; emphasis in original.

20. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997): 223–24; see also Luke 15:5.

21. Russell M. Nelson, "Drawing the Power of Jesus Christ into Our Lives," *Ensign*, May 2017.

22. John 16:33.