

Memory and You

CARLOS E. ASAY

President Holland's remarks about my former athletic accomplishments remind me that there is some virtue in growing older. That virtue is: (1) record books become covered with dust, and (2) memories of people tend to become fuzzy. Therefore, one can ride the bench with a team at the university, yet ten years later, in the minds of most, have been a regular performer. Twenty years after graduation, he is remembered as an all-conference player. Thirty years later, he is an all-American. In just two more years, if dust is not blown off the books and memories refreshed, I fully expect to be inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts.

As I listened to President Holland's introductory comments, I was reminded of an exchange of greetings I had with President Marion G. Romney a few years ago. Early one morning we met on an elevator. I observed that he appeared tired though the day was only beginning. In an attempt to lift his spirits, I asked: "How are you on this beautiful, bright morning?"

"Oh, about average," he drawled.

"Well, average for you," I said, "is far above average for the rest of us."

He paused a moment, and then, with a twinkle in his eye, closed the conversation with

these words: "My boy" (he calls all of us boys), "you are very kind, but you are not the least bit honest."

I am grateful to this kindly, but "slightly dishonest" gentleman who sits behind me. He is a special friend of ours, and he is the one who represents you and this unique university so admirably. It is always a pleasure and honor to visit with the Hollands and you on this campus and recall some very cherished memories of years past.

After much thought and prayer, I have determined to speak with you about *memory*—a subject that I have already introduced in part. I am not qualified to treat this topic as a professional psychologist would, nor as someone else would who understands the wonders of the human mind. I do, however, want to share with you some thoughts and feelings about memory and remembering as related to the gospel and our spiritual welfare.

Carlos E. Asay was a member of the Presidency 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 February 1985.

It seems incredible to me that one's brain has the storage capacity of one quadrillion bits of information. If this is true, allowing for the possible error of ten or twelve bits, why does one have such difficulty memorizing the thirteen articles of faith, the six missionary discussions, the basics of a biology course? Or, why is it so hard to recall one's home telephone number on the spur of the moment? Perhaps your professors can provide answers to these questions.

It is equally amazing to me that there is a close relationship between memory and mood, memory and testimony, memory and models, memory and thoughts, and memory and you. Permit me to share some ideas about these five relationships in a gospel context.

Memory and Mood

Memory, according to the experts, often conditions our moods. Those who remember only the disappointing experiences of life tend to become bitter and cynical. Those who recall only their enemies and the forces mustered against them may lose their courage. Those who recall only past injuries may continue to feud with the world. But those who recall the positive and encouraging things remain bright and optimistic.

I remember one missionary with whom I labored who had a very sour disposition. His companions claimed that he was raised on lemon juice, dill pickles, and sauerkraut. Obviously, he was consumed with a heavy burden of unpleasant memories.

One insightful writer observed: "The memory is a window through which life is viewed. The color of that window determines the color of our world" (Dr. Ernest A. Fitzgerald). How awful it would be for one to walk through life with everything distorted by the red of anger, blue of despair, black of fear, or green of envy.

I do not know the color of Enos's life when he went into the forests to hunt beasts and had his wrestle before God. One is led to think that

it was somewhat gray, for he had not received a remission of his sins. However, as he stimulated his memory by recalling the words of eternal life spoken by his father, and as he reflected upon the joy of the Saints, the cloud of gloom was dispelled. Through prayer and the exercise of faith, Enos emerged from the woods colored in the rays of light (see Enos 1:1–8).

I know the color of Alma's life as he and others sought to destroy the church of God. He states that when he remembered all his sins, he was racked with eternal torment. Then, when he remembered all that his father had prophesied about Christ's atonement, something marvelous occurred. He said:

And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more.

And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain!

Yea, I say unto you, my son, that there could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains. Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy. [Alma 36:19–21]

Elijah is another interesting case in point. Even though he had slain the prophets of Baal and witnessed heavenly powers, he lost his courage and the desire to live when hunted by wicked Queen Jezebel. It required an angel, the whisperings of "a still small voice," and other reassurances to change his mood (see 1 Kings 19).

I would ask, Do you allow your mind to wallow in memory of past hurts and injuries, thus becoming blind to everything else? Or, do you recall the positive and encouraging things that cause your life to remain bright and optimistic? What is the color of your memories? Remember, the memories are yours, and the palette and brushes are in your hands. Be

certain that you use the right colors as you paint the past and niche it in your mind.

Memory and Testimony

In our missionary service, we frequently invite our investigator friends to obtain a testimony by reading the Book of Mormon and praying about its contents. Our point of reference is chapter 10 of Moroni, verses 3–5. We usually say to our friends: “Read this book and ask God if it is not true.” Then we promise, as the book states, that “he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.”

I don’t fault any who have used the process described above. I do, however, suggest a better and more successful approach. Let me read the verses and highlight four steps to a testimony, two of which are often neglected:

Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall (1) read these things, . . . that ye would (2) remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive these things, and (3) ponder it in your hearts.

. . . I would exhort you that ye would (4) ask God . . . if these things are not true; and . . . he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. [Moroni 10:3–5; emphasis added]

I emphasize two words, *remember* and *ponder*. I do so because I feel strongly that reading the things of God without remembering and pondering how those things fit into the divine scheme tends to confuse, not enlighten. Enlightenment occurs and truth is revealed as things are fitted together in an understandable way. In the process, the mind is stimulated, memory is stirred, and the heart is prepared to respond to the whisperings of the Spirit.

Ammon rehearsed many truths to King Lamoni before he was converted. Among other things:

. . . he began at the creation of the world, and also the creation of Adam, and told him all the things concerning the fall of man, and . . . laid before him the records and the holy scriptures of the people, which had been spoken by the prophets. [Alma 18:36]

Similarly, Aaron did the same with the father of Lamoni. He, as did Ammon, preached of Adam, the Fall, the plan of redemption, and the atonement of Christ. All of this was done to place things in proper perspective and to build the foundations of a testimony.

When your testimony sags or appears to stumble along the way, why not remember the goodness of the Lord? In the process of positive recall, perhaps you can experience the spiritual healing which King Lamoni and his father experienced. How very exhilarating it is to ponder the merciful nature of God, and how very healing it is to remember the eternal gifts of Christ.

Memories and Models

Most of us have been deeply influenced by other men and women. I suspect that this is the way it should be. It was Elder Talmage who wrote that the Father’s original purpose was “to use persuasive influences of wholesome precept and *sacrificing example* with the inhabitants of the earth, then to leave them free to choose for themselves” (James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*, 12th ed. [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1924], p. 55; emphasis added).

All of us, I would guess, have a model or hero tucked away in the recesses of our memory. You could have many. From time to time you may think of that model, and from him or her draw needed inspiration. This is particularly true when the hill you are required to climb seems insurmountable or the decision to be made seems especially difficult.

Helaman knew the value of memories and models, for he instructed his sons:

. . . I have given unto you the names of our first parents who came out of the land of Jerusalem; and this I have done that when you remember your names ye may remember them; and when ye remember them ye may remember their works; and when ye remember their works ye may know how that it is said, and also written, that they were good.

Therefore, my sons, I would that ye should do that which is good, that it may be said of you, and also written, even as it has been said and written of them. [Helaman 5:6–7]

You should not clutter your memories with men or women of doubtful reputation. They will disappoint you and drag you downward. But, rather, you should selectively place in your mind the giants of goodness and, each time you think of them, resolve that you will walk in their footprints and go beyond their mark. This is especially important as you trudge that long walk toward a college degree.

Memory and Thoughts

“The mind,” it is said, “feeds on the food that is placed at its disposal.” Therefore, “what we give to our minds will eventually determine what they contain” (Dr. Ernest A. Fitzgerald). This certainly is no startling fact; everyone seems to know it. Yet, people continue to read pornographic materials, view smutty and suggestive films, and sing songs with filthy lyrics. Wittingly or not, those who do these things will store polluted memories and reap the bitter pill.

I find it difficult to understand how some members of the Church can blatantly disregard this divine injunction:

. . . let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven.

The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth. [D&C 121:45–46]

What a gold mine of promises are cradled in this scripture! Who in his right mind would place in jeopardy the promise of confidence, the doctrine of the priesthood, and the companionship of the Holy Ghost?

Christina Rossetti wrote:

*I have a room where into no one enters
Save I myself alone.
There sits a blessed memory on a throne
There my life centers.*

[Emphasis added]

If we counted or enthroned our blessings more, our memories would become pleasant and our lives would be much happier. I like these thoughts:

*The sun was shining in my eyes
And I could hardly see
To do the necessary task
That was allotted me.
Resentment of the vivid glow
I started to complain
When all at once upon the air
I heard the blindman’s cane.*

[Earl Musselman]

Over and beyond the counting of blessings and the garnishing of thoughts with virtue, let me share one more thing pertaining to memory and thoughts. A noted physician counseled:

Know the great souls that make up the moral radium of the world. You must be born of their spirit, initiated into their fraternity. . . .

. . . As the soul is dyed by the thoughts, let no day pass without contact with the best literature of the world. Learn to know your Bible. . . . [I would add “and the other standard works of the Church.”] In forming character and in shaping

conduct, its touch has still its ancient power. Fifteen or twenty minutes day by day will give you fellowship with the great minds of the race, and little by little as the years pass you extend your friendship with the immortal dead. They will give you faith in your own day. Listen while they speak to you of the fathers.

*. . . Life is a straight, plain business [game], and the way is clear, blazed for you by generations of strong men, into whose labours you enter and whose ideals must be your inspiration. [Dr. William Osler, *A Way of Life* (New York: Paul B. Hoeber, Inc., Medical Book Department of Harper and Brothers, 1937), pp. 37–38; emphasis added]*

Do not become enslaved by destructive or degrading thoughts. They can become as strong and debilitating as Satan's iron chains. There is an old story about a man who was recalling the hardships of his early life. He exaggerated to such limits that his wife felt constrained to correct him. "Be quiet," he said to her. "Half of the fun of remembering the good old days is rearranging them." To rearrange one's memories may not be too bad, if we don't embellish to the point that we lose contact with reality or truth.

I was in a meeting with one of the Brethren when he was requested to tell a story, one he had related on many occasions. Knowing of man's tendency to embellish when something is recounted over and over again, he smiled and asked: "Do you want me to tell it as I told it last time or as it actually happened?"

Do not forget that memory and thoughts are inseparably connected; one runs into the other. So garnish your thoughts with virtue, count your blessings, and have fellowship with the great minds of the race. Those actions will build you a sacred sanctuary of pleasant memories.

Memory and You

Nearly four years ago, I read these words:

*It is said that God gave us memory so we could have roses in winter. But it is also true that without memory we could not have self in any season. The more memories you have, the more "you" you have. That is why, as Swift said, no wise man ever wished to be younger. [George F. Will, "On Turning 40," *Newsweek*, 27 April 1981, p. 104]*

I did not fully appreciate memories and self until I, with the help of others, compiled my oral history. I gave my wife a rough copy of my life story and asked her to edit it. My instructions were: "You know me better than I know myself, so please read it carefully and polish the manuscript."

A half hour later, when I returned to see how she was doing, she was crying. I said, "My goodness, is it that bad?"

"No," she answered, "It is that good!"

"Have you made any changes?" I asked.

"No," she replied, "It is you speaking, and I don't want to erase or edit you out of the record."

We later gave bound copies of my history to our children. Both of us knew that the thing would probably be placed on a shelf and read only sometime. A few weeks ago, however, one of our daughters said to me: "Dad, I love you so very much."

I wondered what was wrong and I asked: "What brought this on?"

She explained, "It was your oral history; I have been reading about your life." She added, "I did not realize that you had done . . . I didn't know that you had experiences such as . . ."

Do we not read that records kept by the ancients enlarged the memory of the people? Of course it is true. Records do preserve language, safeguard truth, and inspire future readers, if they are kept properly.

What a pity it would be if your children and grandchildren were denied that part of you that really should be recorded. Make certain that you are transmitting to your posterity, along with other graces of life, your innermost

thoughts, your poignant feelings, and your sincere testimonies. You owe the rising generation this blessing and more.

Enlarge the memories of those who follow you with your records, leave for them a part of you, and extend to them an opportunity to hold you in cherished memory.

Closing Comments

There is so much more that could be said about memory and remembering as related to you and the gospel of Jesus Christ. For instance, I've said nothing about the need to remember our sacred covenants, our vows, our ordinances. I've said nothing about all of the "types and shadows" mentioned in the scriptures that have been given to direct our thoughts in the proper direction and to keep us in the right path. Nor have I alluded to the role that memory will play

on Judgment Day. I leave it up to you to research the subject further and to fill in all the blanks.

I do pray that you will sanctify yourselves through repentance and believing in God's promise: "He who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more" (D&C 58:42).

At the same time, I pray that you will live so that your name will appear on the list of the righteous, and that it can be written in that "book of remembrance" which serves as a registry "for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name" (3 Nephi 24:16).

I testify of the importance of memory. It does mold our moods. It is associated with testimony. It should include models of righteousness. Of a certainty, it is the product of thoughts. And, in the end, it is you.

I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.