

“The Undiscover’d Country”: Navigating Toward the Future

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In perhaps the most famous soliloquy in one of William Shakespeare’s most famous plays, the brooding character Hamlet reflects on choice, life, and uncertainty. Even if you have not read or seen the play, you will certainly recognize the opening line of Hamlet’s speech: “To be, or not to be: that is the question.”¹ But unless you are a *Star Trek* fan, you may have forgotten that later in that soliloquy, Hamlet refers to death as “the undiscover’d country from whose bourn / No traveller returns.”²

Today I would like to talk about a different “undiscover’d country”: not death but the future, the months and years—the life—you have got ahead of you. And, as someone well advanced in years, I feel qualified to talk about the future because I have been there, sort of, and I am here today to tell you what I have learned along the circuitous path that led to my future, which is now my present.

If you are anything like I was as a student, the short- and long-term future often weighs heavily on your mind. To one degree or another, all of these future events and experiences are undiscover’d country for you, even if you are an experienced and meticulous planner. You may think you know exactly where you are headed, exactly how you will get there, and exactly what it will be like when you get there, but I am here

to tell you that, in the long run, you have got a lot to learn.

Adapting to Changes

Some of the anxiety related to our undiscover’d country comes from unrealistic expectations, from living in an achievement culture, and maybe even from a dose of perfectionism. A couple of weeks ago, Lindsey Leavitt Brown, an author friend of mine, was speaking to one of my classes. She shared with my students her path to publication, including displaying the “books” and poetry she had written as an elementary-school student and the scores of rejections she received when she started her writing career. As a young girl, she knew she wanted to be a writer, but she did not know and had not learned exactly how to make that happen. The lack of knowledge and the uncertainty about who she was and what she wanted to be caused a considerable amount of stress and discouragement because, as she said, “I thought you had to have that all worked out by the time you were nine.”

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Well, she now knows she was wrong.

Of course, at age nine most of us do have some idea of what we want to be and do when we grow up, but that dream often changes as we get older because *we* change as we get older, our *circumstances* change as we get older, and our *opportunities* and *abilities* change as we get older. It is wonderful and wise—and absolutely essential—to have dreams and goals, but it is also wonderful and wise to be flexible enough to allow yourself to adapt to the situations you encounter as you progress through life. Some of those changes occur naturally, some are a result of our own efforts and strategic planning, and some arrive unbidden and totally without warning. But I can guarantee that change will come, whether you want it or not.

And I can tell you that the only way to endure well the inevitable curveballs life will throw at you is to be firmly rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Of course, personal, academic, and professional preparation will be invaluable as you chart your way through undiscover'd country, but the light of the gospel and the guidance of the Holy Ghost are the constants that you can rely on to help you make the right decisions when you reach life's inevitable crossroads. That spiritual guidance is the only sure way to know whether to stop and camp for a while or to forge ahead on the path to the left or to the right.

Discovering the Church

Let me illustrate—and witness to the truthfulness of—what I just said with some personal examples.

I was in eighth grade when I first heard the word *Mormon*. I am pretty sure that I was not aware of any of my classmates at McKemy Middle School in Tempe, Arizona, who were actual members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but I was aware, dimly, that such a religion existed and that it was radically different from the Roman Catholic religion I had been raised in. When I started ninth grade at McClintock High School the following year, I met my first Mormon. He was a football teammate of mine who talked long and often about his church and its

various—and, what seemed to me, exhausting—activities. But aside from being a member of a strange religion, Walt Denham was normal in most other respects, and he was a great friend. As a Mormon insider, he pointed out that our school was swarming with other kids from his church. Most of those kids seemed all right or even better than all right.

In my junior year, one of those kids, Elizabeth Foley, invited me to the annual Sadie Hawkins dance. I was thrilled to discover that such a gorgeous young woman knew who I was and even more thrilled to go on a date with her. That first date eventually led to another, which led to another, and pretty soon we were dating regularly. Like Walt, Elizabeth was furiously active in her religion and constantly trying to drag me to seminary, firesides, Mutual, sacrament meetings, and any other Church function she was involved in. I have to admit that my interest in those activities was inversely proportional to my interest in Elizabeth. I absolutely loved being around her just as much as I absolutely loathed the idea of going to some activity at her strange church.

As our relationship matured, she talked more and more about her religion and about how, someday, she planned to get married in a temple. I told her that as far as I was concerned, one church building was as good as another, and she explained—or tried to explain—that it was a little more complicated than that. We kept dating, she kept pitching Mormon activities to me, and I kept resisting. Not long into our senior year, she broke up with me because she did not want to risk falling in love with someone she could not marry in the temple. Her parting gift was a grim-looking black paperback called *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*.³ I tossed the book into my locker and tried to forget about it.

In an odd twist of fate, around the time that Elizabeth and I broke up, BYU started recruiting me to play football for them. My dad absolutely hated the thought of me going to BYU (he was sure they would brainwash me into joining their church) and pushed me to accept instead the scholarship offer from the University of Arizona. After visiting both schools and meeting BYU's

brand-new head coach, a guy named LaVell Edwards, I decided to sign with BYU for two reasons: Provo was a refreshing contrast from the Arizona desert I was living in and, at the time, BYU had such a weak football team that I thought I had a pretty good chance to see a lot of playing time. (It turned out that I was right, just not in the way I expected. In my four years on the team, I did see lots of playing time; unfortunately, most of it was from the sidelines.)

In the end, neither religion nor Elizabeth had anything to do with my decision to attend BYU. It just seemed to make good football sense.

Beginnings of Church Membership

A few months passed, and, as my high school career drew to a close, I started wondering why Elizabeth's religion was such a big deal to her and why she was so deeply committed to it. That is when I remembered that *Marvelous*-something book, and I thought it might help me understand what she could not get me to understand. I took it home and skimmed it. Most of the text was way beyond my understanding, but when I went back through it looking for answers, I came upon a passage in chapter 2 written by a boy who related an incredible experience he had had in 1820.

When I finished reading that passage, I knew that this boy—whoever he was—had honestly related an actual experience. He really had gone into the forest to pray, and he really had seen God the Father and Jesus Christ. His story was true.

Well, that led to a whirlwind of events—talking to missionaries, going to church, talking with Elizabeth about her church's doctrine—that placed me at a crucial crossroad: Knowing what I knew, should I join this church? The missionaries had their own ideas, of course, but *I* did not know if I had the courage to take that leap of faith, especially because I knew that my father would consider it a departure not just from the Catholic Church but also from my family.

So I prayed, and I fasted for the first time. I had my own wrestle with the Spirit, trying to distill God's will from my own thoughts and desires. I can tell you that it was the hardest thing I had ever done. I did not have a vision or a burning in

my bosom or any sort of obvious manifestation that would have made the decision easy, but I did finally feel the answer. And it was not the answer I wanted.

I ended up missing my first two baptism appointments, and I can only imagine what the poor missionaries were thinking, but my work schedule finally allowed me to show up at the Tempe stake center on July 2, this very day in 1972, to be baptized a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

It would be a monumental understatement to say that this decision altered the path of my life, and it is impossible to understate the role that prayer and the Holy Ghost played in making that decision. Though I did not realize it at the time, I have learned in the decades since then that when I have taken the time to ponder and pray about some of life's most important decisions, I have been blessed to know which path to take. And it is probably no surprise to you to hear that the right path is not always the easiest.

Preparing to Enter Undiscover'd Country

So I came to Provo in late July, just in time for twice-a-day football practices and to settle into my dorm and gear up for my first semester of college, a semester in which I would earn a C- in freshman English.

I can't blame my lousy grades that semester on football or on homesickness, but I think that part of my problem was heartsickness. Elizabeth had stayed in Arizona to attend school, and the longer I was away from her, the more I missed her—and I had a pretty good idea of how to solve that problem. I proposed. She said yes. We got married just in time to move into Wymount Terrace for my sophomore year. Not surprisingly, my academic record improved almost immediately, and, thanks to Elizabeth, I stopped taking classes just because they sounded interesting and instead took classes that would actually lead to graduation.

When BYU handed me my diploma in December 1976, they also handed us an eviction notice. I finished my last final exam just before Christmas break, and we still did not know where we would be living when we had to move out of

Wymount a week or so later. I have to tell you, that caused us considerable stress.

College life had not exactly been stress free. The rigors of football and an English major (and yes, I am well aware of the irony of my majoring in English after my lowly C– start) took a lot out of me, and to call our budget “shoestring” would be a gross exaggeration. But the challenging nature of my last three years at BYU was nothing compared to facing an unknown, uncertain, terrifyingly blank future—a daunting undiscover’d country. In those gut-wrenching days when I was searching madly for a job, I realized that, for me, my college experience had been something like tubing down the Salt River in Arizona. There were bumps and twists and some white water along the way, but there was also the security of solid land to my left and to my right and the promise that if I stayed in the river long enough, it would deliver me to the exit point, where I could get out safely.

The problem I was facing in December 1976 was that my final destination was not a crystal pond somewhere; it was a figurative ocean: vast, deep, and endless. In those dark, terrifying days of drifting into the great unknown, we spent a lot of time praying, making contingency plans, and searching for cheap apartments that might take us with a pittance for a deposit and no advance notice. And we also took comfort in the scriptures, especially these two: “Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of” (Matthew 6:8) and “The Lord knoweth all things from the beginning; wherefore, he prepareth a way to accomplish all his works among the children of men” (1 Nephi 9:6).

And did I say that we prayed day and night for a miracle?

Settling and Uprooting

A miracle came. A high school up in Ogden had a sudden opening for an English teacher; specifically, a teacher who might want to coach a little. I grabbed the contract before they could change their minds, and, after Christmas, we moved to Ogden, where we bought a tiny old house on 29th Street, just below Harrison Boulevard, and settled

in to start our grown-up lives. We fully expected to live there for decades.

We lasted just six months.

Though I loved my colleagues and my students at Weber High, when a vacancy at my high school alma mater opened up in March, I had to apply. They offered me the job at the end of the school year, so in July we packed up our meager belongings, sold our little old house, and moved to Arizona. We bought a brand-new house, got involved in the ward, started having kids, and figured that, without a doubt, we would finish out our lives in Arizona.

We lasted ten years.

In those ten years, while teaching high school full-time, I went to graduate school part-time at Arizona State University—primarily to make myself a better high school English teacher but also to take advantage of the salary incentives that came with a graduate degree. While in graduate school, I started writing magazine articles, scholarly articles for professional journals, fiction, and even a little poetry.

I don’t have time to go into all the details, but after a decade of teaching high school English, I wondered what it might be like to be a college professor—to have a job that gave me more time to write. I applied for a few jobs, heard nothing, and felt lucky that I had a job I loved at a school I loved.

Then came an offer from a university in Japan. A lifetime appointment, even. I was flattered, but the idea of taking my wife and four little children halfway around the world to a foreign country in which none of us would be able to read, write, or speak the local language took more courage than I had. I was ready to say, “Thanks, but no thanks.”

But, knowing how interested I was in teaching at a college level, Elizabeth suggested we should study it out and then pray about it. So we made pros-and-cons lists, talked with family and friends and our bishop, and learned what we could about Japan and Japanese culture. After all that, the answer was pretty clear: No. Nope. No way. “A bird in the hand,” “the devil you know,” and all that.

But Elizabeth pointed out that we had not prayed yet.

So we took turns praying, talking, and then praying some more. The wall of fear I had of moving to Japan effectively blocked the still, small voice, so after days of prayer and conversation, we were still mired in a stupor of thought. And that is when Elizabeth suggested that we pray harder and more humbly.

And that is when the answer I did not want to hear arrived: Go.

We went.

And it was hard. Stimulating, soul-stretching, and life-enriching hard.

We lasted three years.

After about two years, we started having feelings that maybe Japan was not the end for us, so I started applying for jobs in the United States. I quickly learned that in the days before email and Skype, no one wanted to interview some guy in Japan. So we dug in, assuming that the Lord must want us to stay in Japan for reasons beyond our own understanding.

Early one morning during our third year there, our phone rang. It was R. Lanier Britsch, the academic vice president at BYU–Hawaii. A member of their English department had just left, and he asked if I would be interested in filling the position.

Not a lot of prayer was necessary to confirm that decision!

We moved to the fabulous north shore of Oahu and fell in love with Hawaii, the university, and its wonderful students from all over the world. We bought a house. We even bought grave sites. We knew beyond a doubt that we had finally reached our last stop. It would take a tsunami or some other act of God to pry us from our bright little island in the Pacific.

We lasted four years.

At the beginning of my fourth year in paradise, I received a letter from Greg Clark, a member of the English department at BYU in Provo. There was an opening in their department for someone with my qualifications. Would I be interested in applying?

Easy answer: No!

But Elizabeth and I felt that we should talk it over, so we did—with *extreme* prejudice. Neither one of us wanted to leave Laie. Neither one of us wanted to give up the sun-drenched beaches for snow-capped mountains. But we studied it out in our minds, made our pros-and-cons lists, talked to friends who worked in Provo, and made our decision: No.

Of course we still had one step left to complete: we had to pray about it. We had to seek the Spirit and then be sensitive enough to discern our Heavenly Father's will through the shouted objections of our own will. And it was tough. That old stupor of thought settled in every time we prayed for confirmation, and every morning when we walked the beach at sunrise, that stupor-y fog got even thicker. But we kept at it until we finally had an answer.

I guess you know what that answer was.

The Inevitability of Retrospect

It is now obvious from my current perspective how each of the decisions Elizabeth and I have made in the last few decades led us to where we currently are. From where we stand now, the destination was inevitable. But on the front end, when we were just getting started, we faced the great void of undiscover'd country with little idea of what would come next.

In that respect, life follows one of the key principles of fiction writing: the notion called “the inevitability of retrospect.”⁴ Those of us who like stories, whether reading them or watching them, would admit that suspense, or the question of what will happen next, is usually what keeps us engaged. We want to follow a plot filled with wonder and speculation, and we hope to be surprised by how things ultimately turn out. In the writing of fiction, being predictable is one of the worst sins a writer can commit.

Author and editor L. Rust Hills defined the inevitability of retrospect. He wrote:

When you begin a story and while you're reading it, . . . alternatives to the character's fate and to the plot's action seem open, possible, available. But when you've

*finished the story and look back, the action should seem inevitable.*⁵

When it comes to real life, though, most of us feel exactly the opposite. We crave predictability. Not only do we want to know where we are headed, but we really want to know when and how we will get there. In my experience, much of the stress about my life or my career had to do with facing the unknown, my own undiscover'd country.

One stressor related to graduating from college is the looming unknown. College life has plenty of uncertainties, but one thing is always certain: next semester you will have a schedule of classes and a routine that will be somewhat familiar. When you are through with college, that scheduled certainty evaporates, and you are dumped from a cozy river into the ocean of life with a distant and seemingly endless horizon. Facing that transition from a stable student life to the broad vicissitudes of adult life can be terrifying.

So, how can you navigate, or prepare to navigate, this ocean of life, this undiscover'd country that you will enter when you leave BYU?

At our stage of life, Elizabeth and I can take a retrospective look at our lives and careers and see the inevitable steps that led us to where we now live. We took those steps with faith, like Nephi, “not knowing beforehand the things which [we] should do” (1 Nephi 4:6). We learned that our Heavenly Father loves us, that He has a plan for us, and that if we take the time to ponder and pray, we can learn His will for us. We learned that such pondering and praying isn't easy and isn't always fun, but it has always blessed us—especially when life smacked us with hard, sometimes heartbreaking experiences.

We learned that the paths of life are lined with wonderful, loving people who are willing to help us along the way. We learned to follow Nephi's advice: “Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope” (2 Nephi 31:20). We learned that, more often than we would like, we have to be patient and long-suffering. As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said, “Some blessings come soon, some come late, and some don't come until heaven; but for those who embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ, *they come.*”⁶

Most of all, we learned that when we center our lives on Jesus Christ and try to live by His teachings, we will always be able to find our way—the right way—to the next steps in our lives.

Life has taught Elizabeth and me that Heavenly Father has a plan for us, and I know that He also has a plan for each of you. I know that if you will ponder, pray, and listen, He will lead you to where He wants you to be. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 3, scene 1, line 56.
2. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 3, scene 1, lines 79–80.
3. See LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (1950).
4. See L. Rust Hills, *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular: An Informal Textbook* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 24.
5. Hills, *Writing in General*, 25.
6. Jeffrey R. Holland, “An High Priest of Good Things to Come,” *Ensign*, November 1999; emphasis in original.