

Lessons from the Potter and the Clay

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Let me tell you about some people I know. One is a woman who served a full-time mission when it was not fashionable to be a sister missionary. She received no financial support nor spiritual encouragement from her family. Upon returning, she worked her way through college and graduate school, marrying when most considered her rather old. After her children were born, her husband lost his job; he has yet to find permanent employment. However, by taking temporary jobs here and there, including those the family could do together, this woman and her husband have survived financially for several years. The couple serves faithfully in Church callings, finding numerous opportunities to encourage and assist those who are in need. Whenever I visit their relatively small and humble home, I am struck by their simultaneous expressions of gratitude, peace, and joy and their enthusiastic pursuit of knowledge.

I know another woman who was widowed at age twenty-four, after only three years of marriage. She worked hard to support her young family and eventually became a very successful businesswoman. At the height of her career, as a result of a client's dishonest dealings, she lost her business and any capital to begin

again. Today she struggles financially and is learning to live a much simpler lifestyle. However, she considers herself wealthy because she has grandchildren and opportunities to expand her understanding and appreciation of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

What do these two friends of mine have in common? Life has rarely, if ever, been easy for them. It has not been at all what they had expected, nor does it appear that it will become easier in the future. Yet they continue to trust in the Lord.

Many of you may be feeling great concern as you look to the future. You are often reminded that the most critical decisions in life are made during these, your college years. You hear frantic reports of a diminishing job market, a shrinking marriage market, and expanding competition to get what little there is of each. Fears of losing a scholarship, running out of tuition money, never having a date, and lacking the intellect to complete graduation requirements can keep you perpetually burdened with doubt and worry. When

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the Savior proclaims, “Be of good cheer, and do not fear, for I the Lord am with you, and will stand by you” (D&C 68:6), we sometimes conclude he couldn’t *possibly* be talking to students. We think that not until after we graduate, marry, and settle into a career can we experience a life that is rejoicing, relaxing, and reassuring. That is, until you talk to those who have graduated, married, and are settled in a career and find that many of them worry, too.

My remarks today are an attempt to dispel some of our worries and concerns. When the Lord invites us to “cast [our] burden” upon him (Psalms 55:22), I believe he is talking to us now, regardless of our current lot in life. When he said, “I am come that [ye] might have life, and that [ye] might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10), I don’t believe he meant only after retirement but that we can enjoy peace and happiness now.

President Ezra Taft Benson said:

I hope that we will keep ever burning in our hearts the spirit of this great work which we represent. If we do so, we’ll have no anxiety. We’ll have no fear. We’ll not worry about the future because the Lord has given us the assurance that if we live righteously, if we keep his commandments, if we humble ourselves before him, all will be well. [So Shall Ye Reap, comp. Reed A. Benson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1960), pp. 58–59]

Actually, if directed properly, our worries and fears may be the very emotions that lead us to where we need to be. Sister Virginia Pearce said,

The uncertainties of earth life can help to remind each of us that we are dependent on [our Heavenly Father]. But that reminder is not automatic. It involves our agency. We must choose to take our fears to him, choose to trust him, and choose to allow him to direct us. We must make these choices when what we feel most inclined to do is to rely more and more on our own frantic and often

distorted thinking. [“Fear,” *Ensign*, November 1992, p. 90; emphasis in original]

How do we direct our fears and worries to the Lord so that we can focus our energies on the things that really matter?

The scriptures are filled with glorious imagery that leads to deeper appreciation of the Lord’s counsel to us. Today I would like to use the symbolism of how a potter transforms clay into a valuable and useful vessel to show the Lord’s guiding hand in our lives. I am indebted to Brian Christensen, assistant professor of ceramics here at BYU. He generously gave of his time to both demonstrate and explain the process of forming clay pots. The slides you will see show one of his current students engaged in the ceramic process and some of Professor Christensen’s completed pieces.

Old Testament prophets used the metaphor of the potter and the clay to teach a particular dimension of our relationship to the Lord and remind us of our dependence on him. In Isaiah we read: “But now, O Lord, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand” (Isaiah 64:8).

Elder Bruce R. McConkie identified the potter in the metaphor as Christ, “meaning that he governs in the affairs of men so as to mould and shape earthen human vessels into vessels of honor and service to him” (*MD*, p. 580). By understanding the process required to form a clay vessel, we are able to more fully appreciate the role the Savior, or the Master Potter, performs in our own lives.

First, let’s look at the qualities in the clay itself. This readily available raw material is part of the earth. It is in itself one of God’s creations. We are struck from the very beginning by the humility and unpretentiousness manifest in unworked clay. How appropriate to compare our mortal bodies to tabernacles of clay (see Mosiah 3:5), a lowly substance capable of being formed into vessels of glory. It reminds us of our own nothingness without

the skills, the vision, and the sacrifice of the Master Potter.

Of all sculpting materials, clay responds the easiest to touch and retains the most minute detail, even a thumbprint. Each detail can be changed innumerable times until the potter is satisfied and declares the vessel complete. As sons and daughters of God, each of us bears his imprint. Jesus alluded to our bearing the imprint of God when he taught in Jerusalem. A group of Pharisees and Herodians, attempting to trap Jesus with their cunning questions, asked, “What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?” Jesus drew their attention to Tiberius’ image engraved on a Roman coin and responded, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (see Matthew 22:15–22). If the coin belongs to Caesar, what then belongs to God? Elder James E. Talmage suggested the following:

Every human soul is stamped with the image and superscription of God, however blurred and indistinct the line may have become through the corrosion or attrition of sin; and as unto Caesar should be rendered the coins upon which his effigy appeared, so unto God should be given the souls that bear His image. Render unto the world the stamped pieces that are made legally current by the insignia of worldly powers, and give unto God and His service, yourselves—the divine mintage of His eternal realm. [Jesus the Christ (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1956), pp. 546–47]

In the metaphor of the potter, the Lord’s handiwork and detail in the clay is an enduring reminder that he has formed us and that we will “not be forgotten of [him]” (Isaiah 44:21).

However, the clay is not without its weaknesses. Initially it is unresponsive and requires at least three preparatory treatments before it can be shaped. First, the potter must add water—another seemingly simple element, but one that has vital properties. Water brings the clay

to life. The symbolic water we receive from the Savior is as critical to our existence as physical water is to the clay. To the Samaritan woman drawing water from a well, Jesus taught:

Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life. [John 4:14]

Elder Bruce R. McConkie described this “everlasting water” as the “words of eternal life, the message of salvation, the truths about God and his kingdom; it is the doctrines of the gospel” (see *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* 1 [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965], pp. 151–52). These everlasting truths keep our hopes and faith in Christ alive. They are essential to our ability to endure.

Another form of preparation occurs when the potter dries out the clay while kneading it and eliminating air pockets. In ancient times the clay was even trodden underfoot to form the paste (see Isaiah 41:25). These “kneadings” of the potter can be paralleled to disappointments and at times severe challenges we experience individually or as a people. They are not intended to destroy but have a refining capacity to bring increased perspective and wisdom. In 1855 Elder Wilford Woodruff told the Saints to trust the hands of the potter, particularly during their current hardships. He said:

The chastisements we have had from time to time have been for our good, and are essential to learn wisdom, and carry us through a school of experience we never could have passed through without. I hope, then, that we may learn from the experience we have had to be faithful, and humble, and be passive in the hands of God, and do His commandments. [JD 2:198]

Joseph Smith recognized the growth and progress that came from his life of adversity. Likening himself to a rough stone, he said:

The only polishing I get is when some corner gets rubbed off by coming in contact with something else, striking with accelerated force against religious bigotry, priestcraft, lawyer-craft, doctor-craft, lying editors, . . . backed by mobs, blasphemers, licentious and corrupt men and women—all hell knocking off a corner here and a corner there. Thus I will become a smooth and polished shaft in the quiver of the Almighty. [Teachings, p. 304]

Sometimes I think we expect that our lives will be free from hardship, suffering, and pain if we just continue to pay our tithing, read our scriptures, and do our home and visiting teaching most of the time. We like to focus on scripture passages that proclaim God’s love and concern for us, concluding that he will therefore protect us from any discomfort and distress if we are at least trying to keep his commandments. We are then surprised when we get sick right before finals, or we lose our job while trying to save money for a mission, or what looks like a tragedy hits a strong family in the ward. We may be wiser to also notice scriptures where the Lord says:

Whom I love I also chasten. [D&C 95:1]

My people must be tried in all things, that they may be prepared to receive the glory that I have for them, even the glory of Zion; and he that will not bear chastisement is not worthy of my kingdom. [D&C 136:31]

Remember that the Savior came to “heal” broken hearts, not to prevent them. It is also helpful to note that one meaning of the word *chaste* is “pure,” and, therefore, to “chasten” also means to “purify” (*Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1981).

During the kneading process, the potter will become aware of stones and other foreign objects mixed in with the clay. They will need to be identified and removed by running a wire through the clay as the final preparation to

shaping. In reference to the potter and clay metaphor, Brigham Young identified a part that we must assume in this cleansing. He said, “It is my business to . . . use the wire to draw from the lump any material that would obstruct the potter from preparing a vessel unto honor” (*JD* 4:23). In the analogy, it is important to recognize that our responsibility is not a passive one. It is through the process of repentance, confessing and forsaking our sins, that we do our part to become pure and receptive in the hands of the Potter.

Now that the clay is pliable and free from debris, the potter is ready to anchor the clay wedge on a wheel. In a sure and confident manner, the potter presses the clay down and brings it up until it is not only centered on the outside but eventually centered at its very core. It is critical that the clay be totally centered or it can never respond to the directives of the potter and therefore never be formed into a vessel of honor. When the clay does not deviate to the left nor to the right, the potter knows it is centered. Elder Heber C. Kimball, a potter himself by trade, taught, “What makes the clay snap? Because it wants its own way; and you cannot be happy unless you submit to the law of God, and to the principles of His government” (*JD* 2:154).

Our focused faith in Christ even enables us to perform beyond our natural abilities. Recall Peter when he walked on water. I am disappointed when I hear those who claim the incident shows that Peter was lacking in faith. If we accuse Peter of not having faith, what must we conclude about the eleven who remained in the boat? President Howard W. Hunter explained the source of Peter’s success in walking on the water and why that success subsided. He said:

While [Peter’s] eyes were fixed upon the Lord, the wind might toss his hair and the spray might drench his robes, but all was well. Only when with wavering faith he removed his glance from the Master to look at the furious waves and the black

gulf beneath him, only then did he begin to sink.
[“The Beacon in the Harbor of Peace,” *Ensign*,
November 1992, p. 19]

As we become “centered” on the wheel of the Potter or “fix our eyes on Jesus,” as President Hunter said it, we too can walk successfully over “the swelling waves of disbelief” and remain “unterrified amid the rising winds of doubt” (ibid.). Like Peter, we will believe the Savior when he says, “Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid” (Matthew 14:27). Once we are centered in him, right to our very core, we have no need to fear.

The clay is now cleansed, pliable, and centered, allowing the potter to form and shape it into the vessel he has envisioned. I found it fascinating to learn where a potter focuses his attention during this stage of creation. He does not concentrate on the outward appearance of the vessel. He knows that the outside will take care of itself when the inner space is formed. In other words, the form of the inner chamber determines the appearance of the exterior. President Benson spoke to us as a church of the importance of focusing on the inner vessel (see Alma 60:23), beginning first with ourselves, then with our families, and finally with the Church (see “Cleansing the Inner Vessel,” *Ensign*, May 1986, pp. 4–7).

Society and the world hold the magnifying glass to our outward appearance: the style of our clothing, the strength of our GPA, the size of our home, the price of our car. In contrast, the Lord “seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). It is much easier to repair a bad-hair day than to repent of an offense. What a fallacy to think that just because we get a new haircut, or a grade changed, or a new piece of furniture that we are better people. It is equally untrue to conclude that we can change people’s spiritual desires and hopes by simply changing their physical appearance. It is what comes from

the inside, from the heart, that reveals our true level of goodness and is consequently reflected in our outward appearance (see Mark 7:15–23). Likewise, Paul taught that we can be epistles of Christ, not written “with ink” or “in tables of stone” (there is the outward surface only), but with “the Spirit” when we have internalized Christ in the “fleshy tables of the heart” (see 2 Corinthians 3:3).

Not all clay vessels go into their desired shape the first time. Some become marred while they are on the potter’s wheel. The experienced potter Heber C. Kimball explained that it happens when “they are not [content] with the shape the potter has given them, but straightaway put themselves into a shape to please themselves; therefore they are beyond understanding what God designs, and they destroy themselves” (Stanley B. Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball: Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981], p. 270). The Lord described such individuals as those who

seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol.
[D&C 1:16]

While there are no guarantees that once on the wheel you will never go wrong, all is not lost for those who contend against the Potter. The clay is “cut off the wheel and then thrown back again into the mill, to go into the next batch” (HC 4:478). It is given another chance to be obedient and pliable in the hands of the potter. Even so, through sincere repentance, individuals may start again and be found humble before the Lord, willing to hear his word and follow his direction.

That is what Jeremiah meant when he said:

Arise, and go down to the potter’s house. . . .

. . . And, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels.

And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it.

Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel. [Jeremiah 18:2–6]

It is also what Paul was referring to when he said, “Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?” (Romans 9:21).

In all this imagery of being submissive in the hands of the Lord, some of you may be uncomfortable with the apparent absence of agency. In reality, agency is constantly present, but it is not the so-called agency the world has designed. A good potter always gives the clay respect by not moving it faster than it is capable of enduring and will never force it into a shape. With a combination of pinching and pulling movements, adding the living water constantly to keep it flexible and alive, the potter leads the vessel to its proper form. He can feel unique tendencies within the clay that, when followed, lead him to create a different vessel every time. Notice the variety in these completed vessels. Some are more simple, others more complex. Some are rough and cracked, others are very smooth. The true beauty and glory of each individual vessel is produced as a result of the cleansing, kneading, centering, and internal shaping the clay has endured.

We may balk at the thought of trusting our all to the Potter for other reasons. I will mention three.

First, it may be a problem we have with pride: We think we can do things better on our own. In Jeremiah's time, the kingdom of Judah was chastised for not only forsaking the Lord

as the “fountain of living waters,” but for insisting that they design their *own* water vessels. Their vessels turned out to be totally dysfunctional, described as “broken cisterns, that can hold no water” (Jeremiah 2:13).

In reality, being puffed up with our own sense of greatness and ability has no foundation. Stop and think of where you are in your life. How did you get to your current status? How many others have made sacrifices for you, given you guidance, advice, moral and financial support—even just giving you an opportunity to prove yourself? Since my arrival at BYU one and a half years ago, I have been impressed with the older buildings on campus. They were obviously constructed when there were fewer students, a smaller faculty, and a simpler system for administration. Technology, as we know it today, would have been unfathomable to students of that earlier era. Yet those students came to college then as eager to learn and hopeful of the contributions they would give to the world as you are now. Those older buildings remind me that we are the recipients of the inventions, inspiration, and courageous endeavors of those previous graduates. We have the opportunities available to us today because of their sacrifices and contributions.

Perhaps one reason the Savior admonishes us to “become as little children” (Matthew 18:3) is that children are so pliable, free from pride, and receptive to direction from others. A friend of mine recently reported to a Church leader that she overwhelmingly prefers her calling in the Primary to her previous assignment of teaching adults in Sunday School. “I can understand that,” the Church leader responded, “in Primary you still get to work in wet cement.”

We have heard prophets call us a “chosen generation” reserved to come to earth at this important time. I have wondered what that means. What should we be doing to fulfill our important purpose? Is it to become the best

composer? the greatest engineer? or the most renowned financial planner? I don't think so. That seems to be secondary—the exterior. I am intrigued by the absence of pride expressed in a thought by President Joseph F. Smith:

To do well those things which God ordained to be the common lot of all man-kind, is the truest greatness. To be a successful father or a successful mother is greater than to be a successful general or a successful statesman. One is universal and eternal greatness, the other is ephemeral. . . .

. . . Many are unhappy because they imagine that they should be doing something unusual or something phenomenal. Some people would rather be the blossom of a tree and be admiringly seen than be an enduring part of the tree and live the commonplace life of the tree's existence. [GD, pp. 285–86]

Perhaps our greatest mission is to show by the way we approach each day, each assignment—even in the most challenging times—that we will remain valiant, that we will be great covenant-honoring Saints.

A second reason we may resist submitting to the Lord is because we have been abused and mistreated or our agency has been denied by one whom we loved and trusted in the past. Fears of possible consequences of being vulnerable cause us to put up barriers and defenses. We can become convinced that someone else who appears to love us today may only be scheming ways to take advantage of our trust tomorrow. The difference here is that the Master Potter is a perfect being. In the LDS Bible dictionary, under *Faith*, we read:

The Lord has revealed himself and his perfect character, possessing in their fulness all the attributes of love, knowledge, justice, mercy, unchangeableness, power, and every other needful thing, so as to enable the mind of man to place confidence in him without reservation. [p. 669]

We must remember that Jesus Christ came to earth to “*heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised*” (Luke 4:18; emphasis added). There is absolutely no need to fear that he will harm or ever disappoint us!

Finally, we may hesitate to trust the Potter because we have a fear of taking responsibility. We would rather trust other mortals to make our decisions, knowing that if things don't work out as expected, we have someone to blame besides ourselves. Some of us don't know how to be alone with ourselves and our thoughts and therefore miss the direction of the Spirit. Our lives are so filled with schedules and deadlines, social events and noise that silence and stillness have become extremely uncomfortable to us. Elder Henry D. Moyle said:

Without [the] power of the Holy Ghost you and I would not be able to become submissive to the will of our Heavenly Father. We would not know what his will is. . . . We must be as clay in the hands of the potter to permit our lives to be molded in the pattern that the Savior of mankind set for us. [CR, April 1950, p. 148]

No one can tell you just how your life will evolve, nor how to avoid misfortune. You can design your most hoped-for life and painstakingly work to achieve it. But I would dare say that fortunately for you and me, it may not unwind as we have planned. There will be surprising turns that we never could have anticipated. The Lord is in control. He is the Potter. And as a result, we have richer, more meaningful lives. As you look at your own past, you can recognize the obvious guidance of the Lord. He has told us:

As often as thou hast inquired thou hast received instruction of my Spirit. If it had not been so, thou

wouldst not have come to the place where thou art at this time. [D&C 6:14]

Why should we question that he will continue to direct us in the future?

In conclusion, remember what our two most recent prophets have promised us concerning putting our trust in the Lord. President Benson identified ten aspects of our lives that are improved when we submit to him:

Men and women who turn their lives over to God will discover that He can make a lot more out of their lives than they can. He will deepen their joys, expand their vision, quicken their minds, strengthen their muscles, lift their spirits, multiply their blessings, increase their opportunities, comfort their souls, raise up friends and pour out peace. [“Jesus Christ—Gifts and Expectations,” Christmas Devotional, Salt Lake City, 7 December 1986; quoted in TETB, p. 361]

President Howard W. Hunter observed the consequences if we choose *not* to submit to the Lord:

Indifference to the Savior or failure to keep the commandments of God brings about insecurity, inner turmoil, and contention. These are the opposites of peace. Peace can come to an individual only by an unconditional surrender to him who is the Prince of peace and who has the power to confer peace. [That We Might Have Joy (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1994), p. 30]

You are the clay—and as such you are of utmost importance to the Lord. He loves you and desires to shape you into a magnificent vessel of honor—designed and glazed for all eternity. May we therefore set aside our fears and concerns for the future and “trust in the Lord with all [our] heart[s]; and lean not unto [our] own understanding. In all [our] ways” let us “acknowledge him,” and I bear witness “he will direct [our] paths” (Proverbs 3:5–6). He loves us and will continue to support us. I bear witness of that love and that we are not forgotten of him. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.