

Our Mortal Body—A Sacred Gift

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This is an inspiring, humbling, awesome moment for me—one that I have been anticipating for some weeks. I want to say that it is a tremendous honor to be here with you in this setting.

As I projected myself into this moment and as I prepared, I pondered what I could share with you that might in some way change your lives. What a solemn responsibility! I assume that is why you are here at this university and in this assembly—to be enlightened, enriched, and changed. I reflected on President David O. McKay’s words given in an address here at BYU in 1947 that life is a constant state of radiation and absorption. To live is to radiate who we are and what we are, and to live is to absorb that radiation from others—by our life we affect, to some degree, the life of the whole world. The implication, I think, is that each of us has responsibility for and influence in this experience. I am grateful for the invocation in our behalf and the music that has invited the Spirit, and I pray that we may be edified together.

The Importance of This Earth Life

As a young faculty member, I was interviewed by Elder Theodore M. Burton. He counseled me to remind the choice young men

and women who would come to be my students who they really were. It struck me as rather curious at the time. Of course everyone knows who they are—or do they? Over the years I have learned that there was great wisdom in his counsel.

Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here on this earth? Why was it necessary to come here?

Most civilizations have asked these questions since the beginning of mankind’s sojourn upon this earth. The answer is not so simple—there are many divine purposes for our being here. But few in the world today seem to have a clear understanding of who we are or of the importance of this earth life and its relevance in the eternal scheme of Heavenly Father’s plan.

In the beginning we were with God the Eternal Father. We are his literal spirit children (Numbers 27:16). We must have been happy there in the presence of our Eternal Father and Mother and elder brother, Jesus Christ. This was a period of testing, proving ourselves,

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growing, and learning—a time of probation now upon this earth. This was called our first estate. Abraham was told we had intelligence and agency to make our own choices and decisions (Abraham 3:22–28). Why then did we need to come to this second estate? Were we not able to prove our worthiness there in the premortal world?

It seems that in this perhaps very long period of premortal life we had progressed about as far as we could without a mortal, physical body. In order to continue to progress, that we might obtain immortality and eternal life, we had to have a physical body as our Heavenly Father has. The Father has a body of flesh and bones just as tangible as man's. He has allowed Joseph Smith and others to witness this and has revealed this knowledge to us in the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C 130:22).

The Son also has a body of flesh and bones. When Christ revealed himself to the brother of Jared, he had not yet taken a physical body. Christ said:

Behold, this body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit; and man have I created after the body of my spirit; and even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit will I appear unto my people in the flesh. [Ether 3:16]

Christ came into the world to get his mortal body and to become our Savior. After his death, he appeared in his resurrected body to his disciples in Jerusalem and to the Nephites on this continent. “Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have” (Luke 24:39).

If we were to progress eternally, it was clearly necessary to gain a mortal, physical body.

The spirit and the body are the soul of man (D&C 88:15); neither is complete without the other. And the absence of the spirit from the

body is looked upon as a bondage (D&C 45:17, 138:50).

The body was formed from the dust (Abraham 5:7), lifeless without the living spirit. Therefore, a major purpose for coming to this earth was to gain a physical body and become one with our spirit

Other significant purposes for coming to this earth were to gain experience, to grow, to learn, to improve our talents, to give service, and to choose an eternal marriage companion to multiply and replenish the earth. In order to fulfill these commandments we had to have a physical body. Jesus made it plain from his teachings that we are given gifts and talents to be magnified and used in the service of our fellow mortals. “For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required” (Luke 12:48). Through his parable of the talents, it is clear that there will be an accounting from each of us as to how we used our talents and the opportunities we were given (Matthew 25). He further taught his followers that “whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant” (Matthew 20:27).

Still another purpose of coming to this earth was to prove ourselves. Had we not had opportunity to gain experience and prove ourselves in our pre-earth life? Had we not beheld the unfolding of a most amazing plan created by a loving Heavenly Father that provided a way for us to progress beyond that spirit state and work toward our exaltation given as our Father had done before us?

Did we not have the option to accept or reject that plan? Yes, we did. In the pre-earth life there were laws established, and the spirits there had the choice of accepting or rejecting the laws and counsel given. This was our first estate. We kept this first estate by choosing to be obedient to the requirements God had set for us. And thus we qualified ourselves to come into this prepared earth to prove ourselves in our second estate (Abraham 3:24–26). The difference between the first and second

estate was the acquiring of the mortal body in the second estate.

There were many who did not keep their first estate who chose to follow Satan; for doing so they were cast out with him and lost the privilege of coming to this earth to gain a body (Abraham 3:28).

It is almost impossible to understand the complete significance and privilege of receiving a body of flesh and bone. When Christ cast out the evil spirit from the man whom no man could bind with chains, he asked its name. The spirit answered, “Legion: for we are many” (Mark 5:9). Upon command to leave the body of the man who was possessed, the spirits asked permission to enter the bodies of feeding swine: “The herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea” (Mark 5:13). It is so important to have a physical body that these spirits who had forfeited the right to have bodies of their own were even anxious to enter the bodies of swine.

Each of us here kept our first estate or we wouldn't be here. We must have been an enthusiastic lot. From the book of Job (38:7) we understand that “all the sons of God shouted for joy” when the foundations of the earth were laid. Through this gospel plan that was prepared in the beginning we realized that by obedience we could progress, obtain a mortal body, and prepare ourselves for immortality and eternal life. The next step was to prepare a new environment for this probationary period.

And there stood one among them that was like unto God, and he said unto those who were with him: We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell;

And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them. [Abraham 3:24–25]

We had proven ourselves in our first estate or in the spirit world; but in order to progress,

we needed to prove ourselves with the physical body.

The great Book of Mormon prophet Alma indicates we will be judged according to the deeds that have been done in the mortal body (Alma 5:15). Nephi, son of Lehi, also reaffirms that the time should come that we must be judged of our works that were done by the temporal body in our days of probation (1 Nephi 15:32).

The Greatest of All Creations

Our mortal bodies are so consequential that they merit the creation of an earth to make it possible to fulfill the eternal gospel plan of our Heavenly Father. But let us consider the body for a moment just as a physical entity.

Depending on age and size, the body is a composite of tens of trillions of tiny cells. Each little cell is a very independent unit with its own specific function. Each is busily manufacturing who we are, how we function, and, in many ways, the quality of our lives.

There is no aspect of our existence—whether it be social, intellectual, or spiritual—that is not affected by our physical well-being or lack of it.

Each of us—whether tall or short, stout or lean, blond or brunette, young or old—is incredibly unique because we are created in a divine image: “In the image of his own body, male and female, created he them” (Moses 6:9).

What a masterpiece the human body is. What a miracle of creation. In my view, it is the greatest of all creations worlds without end.

How shall we show respect for this precious gift? How shall we care for this divine creation?

In a year's time many of the trillions of little cells and components that make us who we are will replace themselves. What are the raw materials we give those cells to work with? If we use inferior materials to work with, we will end up with an inferior product. If, however,

we are willing to provide superior materials, we may end up with a superior product.

We have been given a Word of Wisdom, wise counsel in how to care for our bodies (D&C 89): “Strong drinks are not for the belly . . . tobacco is not for the body . . . hot drinks are not for the body or belly” (7–9). “Yea, . . . flesh . . . of beasts and of the fowls of the air, I, the Lord, have ordained for the use of man with thanksgiving; nevertheless they are to be used sparingly” (12). “All grain is good for the food of man; as also the fruit of the vine” (16).

We are given a wonderful promise if we obey:

And all saints who remember to keep and do these sayings, walking in obedience to the commandments, shall receive health in their navel and marrow to their bones;

And shall find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures;

And shall run and not be weary, and shall walk and not faint. [D&C 89:18–20]

What a wonderful promise—just a few among many.

We have much scientific knowledge as to what should and should not be taken into the body. We also need to rest, exercise, refine, nurture, and perfect our bodies—for they are the vehicles that will go with us throughout the eternities.

The physicality, the self-healing power, the potential for the highest forms of personal and artistic expression make the body a monument of God’s creative mastery. There is so much we have learned about this prodigious body, and we have so much more to learn.

We do know that the body will respond positively or negatively according to the care we provide or fail to provide. It will adapt to the stresses placed upon it. If we require it to sit bent over and curved for a long period of time, the muscles in the back and neck will lengthen to compensate and the muscles in

front will shorten—soon it will feel just great to carry the body around with very poor alignment, which may lead to other problems.

However, if we require the body to strengthen all the muscles and give the cardiovascular and respiratory systems work and experience, they will continue to function as they were meant to do. If we give each joint the opportunity to maintain its full range of motion, we can have efficient, full use of our instrument. We can accomplish our work, enjoy our play, relieve debilitating stress, and push back our fatigue threshold. If this were not so, dancers and athletes could not improve our physical condition at any age. We are not vegetables—we are living, springing, dynamic beings whose vital systems all depend upon movement and use. We rarely lose our physical capabilities in normal living, but we give them up through nonsense. Of course there are notable exceptions such as disease and injury. But we were made to move. Our bodies do adapt to the stresses placed upon them—gradually, carefully, respectfully, little by little.

Turning Stumbling Blocks into Stepping-Stones

As a young dancer I studied with a distinguished teacher in California, Rozelle Frey. She had been a member of the Anna Pavlova Dance Company in her youth. Her story and influence had remarkable lessons and impact for me. Initially she had trained to become a concert pianist, but when she was taken to see a classical ballet concert, she knew immediately what she wanted to do with her life. There, in her native Sweden, her family, having means, took her to study with a great ballet master teacher. After looking at her work in her audition, he told her that she should continue her career in her piano work, that she had little hope of becoming a dancer. She had a problem that in those days was called “banana legs.” Her legs curved outward like bananas. This simply was not compatible with the turnout or

rotation of the legs required in the positions of ballet. She pleaded with this teacher to give her a chance to study, to prove herself. She was told that his time was simply too important to work with students who had no potential. However, she could come to the classes, stand back by the piano, and satisfy herself, but she would receive no help or criticism from him and would be completely on her own. She accepted with great enthusiasm.

This was before the time of seriously practiced physical therapy, so the result was unexpected. For seven years she worked diligently—pulling, strengthening, stretching, working. At first she went unnoticed, and then gradually she was accepted into the class and finally placed as an example at the front of the class where the students had to pass the teacher's review.

Through the continued, repeated effort of working the muscles correctly and placing on them certain demands, the body responded by adapting to those demands. Because she was young and some bone was not yet solidified but cartilaginous, her legs became straight and tall. Remember I said she became a member of the Anna Pavlova Dance Company eventually. That is remarkable in itself; but even more startling to me was the fact that of the group of dancers she trained with for seven years, she was the only one who was ever chosen to dance in a professional company. Why? Perhaps the others did not have to try as hard or care so much. We all have stumbling blocks placed in our way—those are our growth-promoting experiences. If ever there was a stumbling block for a dancer, it was banana legs. But she made those stumbling blocks into stepping-stones. They caused her to have to try harder, to be more committed. So Miss Frey rose above those in the ordinary, easier paths, and she was able to reach greater heights.

In Ether 12:27 we are told that we are given weaknesses that we might be humble and that if we are humble, our weaknesses may become

our strengths. We might look at our weaknesses as gifts to humble ourselves before God and pray that we can have the will to withstand temptations and weaknesses of body and spirit in whatever form.

Many temptations, testings, and challenges come through the body. There must be opposition in all things. This is part of our proving ourselves. Most of the evil and temptations in our society today are directed at the body. Satan and his followers are seeking our destruction that we may become subject to him. Pornography, physical abuse, drugs, moral transgression, perversion, abortion, suicide, and murder are all vicious designs of Satan to destroy the souls of man. All are directed at the body. Our choice of music, literature, dance, movies, videos, television, friends, etc., can lead to base thoughts and actions regarding the body or to uplifting, respectful thoughts and feelings about the body. Those choices are ours.

Can we recognize the temptations for what they are and reject them, not falling into Satan's traps? We knew there would be temptations and trials, but we knew we could meet them or we wouldn't have shouted for joy.

We have guidance and help in this life. King Benjamin spoke of the model that Christ would be: "And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death" (Mosiah 3:7). Even suffering as he did, he did not succumb.

If we understand the significance of the body in the eternal plan of salvation in even a small way, could we permit ourselves to be dressed immodestly, to allow our bodies to be defiled or to defile that of another, to slash or cut the body—a practice forbidden by God because it was being done in some early cultures (Leviticus 19:28)—to weaken the body with inappropriate substances, to try to strengthen the body with inappropriate substances, to allow our muscles to atrophy and

become weakened through lack of movement and disuse, to deny nourishment to the point of anorexia, or allow other destructive behaviors?

There will be challenges in this life, for our bodies are subject to the natural processes of this mortal world. We are all subject to pain, disease, injury, aging, and infirmity. But the hope and understanding in this lies in the fact that these problems are part of our experience, and they are temporary. Whether young or old, we must all pass through death at the end of our days or probation upon the earth.

God formed man from the dust (Abraham 5:7), and to the dust we return. From the Doctrine and Covenants we read:

Their sleeping dust was to be restored unto its perfect frame, bone to his bone, and the sinews and the flesh upon them, the spirit and the body to be united never again to be divided, that they might receive a fullness of joy. [D&C 138:17]

As a result of Christ’s atonement in our behalf, his suffering of body and spirit, we will rise again. We can read his own words describing his suffering;

Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink—

Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men. [D&C 19:18–19]

These preparations were for us that our bodies and spirits could be restored one to the other by the power of the resurrection of the Holy One of Israel (2 Nephi 9:12).

Spirit and Body Shall Be Reunited

Alma assures us that “the spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its perfect form;

both limb and joint shall be restored to its proper frame” (Alma 11:43). And Nephi counseled his people on this doctrine:

For I know that ye have searched much, many of you, to know of things to come; wherefore I know that ye know that our flesh must waste away and die; nevertheless, in our bodies we shall see God. [2 Nephi 9:4]

One last significant observation about our physical bodies is given by Paul, who warns,

Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?

If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are. [1 Corinthians 3:16–17]

Here is a marvelous promise—one which should be particularly encouraging to all engaged in the pursuit of knowledge:

And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things. [D&C 88:67]

In summary, Who are we? We are the literal offspring of God the Eternal Father. Why are we here? We are here because of the brilliant plan of salvation of a loving Heavenly Father and his Son, our Savior. The earth was prepared in our behalf that we might come (1) to get a mortal body, (2) to get experience with our body of flesh and bone, and (3) to prove ourselves in every way in keeping all of God’s commandments in the flesh.

I have profound esteem for the human body as I have studied, given birth, trained, taught, and observed. Certainly our spirit and body become one—our eternal soul. In times past the body has been looked upon as evil; it was purged and punished as a way of

purifying the spirit. That is not our Heavenly Father's way.

In Thessalonians we are told that all should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honor (1 Thessalonians 4:4) And in Romans, Paul pleads,

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. [Romans 12:1]

Just as Alma asked his people, let us ponder this scenario, "Can you imagine to yourselves that ye hear the voice of the Lord, saying unto you, in that day: Come unto me ye blessed, for behold your works have been the works of righteousness upon the face of the earth?" (Alma 5:16).

Through Abraham our Lord tells us that his expressed work and his glory is to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man (Moses 1:39).

So, as I mentioned at the beginning, if we are to be changed today, let us change together. Beginning today, let each of us try harder to care for our bodies, to keep them clean and

undefiled inside and out and keep our passions and appetites within the bounds the Lord has set. We will feel better and will be able to give more service. We will be able to fulfill all of those things that we desire to do here upon the earth so we might lift up our hearts and be glad (D&C 29:5), that we might have a fullness of joy.

Finally, to the Prophet Joseph Smith the Lord said:

And, if you keep my commandments and endure to the end you shall have eternal life, which gift is the greatest of all the gifts of God. [D&C 14:7]

It is my plea and humble prayer today that each of us can recognize the sacredness of our bodies; that we can have a reverence for them and use all of the manifold information available to us to nourish and edify them, even celebrate them in righteousness; that they can facilitate all of the experiences here and in the worlds to come; that we can recognize Satan's ploys in degrading this precious gift that permits us to have eternal life.

May this be our desire and resolve, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.