

The Skills of a Saint

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The operation on the infected leg of the Prophet Joseph Smith gives us a story about nobility and the comfort that comes from faith in a loving father. There is also another, less well-known lesson hidden in this story. The doctor attending Joseph at the end of the ordeal is sometimes portrayed as a humble country doctor with uncertain skills. But Elder Neal A. Maxwell pointed out that this was not the case, citing Dr. LeRoy S. Wirthlin, a Latter-day Saint doctor who researched the event:

The medical doctor in final attendance . . . was Dr. Nathan Smith, founder of the Dartmouth Medical School. He brought two doctors and several medical students with him to attend to young Joseph. . . . Dr. Nathan Smith was highly qualified, and he was using a very advanced technique. Thus “the only man in America who could save [Joseph’s] leg was just five miles away.”¹

Elder Maxwell then went on to explain how Dr. Smith happened to be in the vicinity of Joseph Smith’s home because his plans to leave the area were “delayed by a typhoid epidemic.”²

In addition to the academic and spiritual knowledge you are gaining at BYU, the skills you are developing are also very important—

though, like Dr. Smith, you probably do not now understand how important they will be, nor to whom they will be valuable. When Dr. Smith’s skills were needed, the Lord managed the circumstances to make them available to Joseph when and where they were critically needed.

Skill, even specialized skill, plays an important role in the Lord’s plans. We are told that the Lord often answers our prayers through the ministrations of our family, friends, neighbors, and church leaders. In the case of Joseph’s leg, it was a stranger who had the necessary skill to save his leg. As Saints we are taught to rely on God to watch over us and to supply our needs, but we also have the responsibility to prepare ourselves however possible against a time of need. That’s why we follow the counsel of the prophets to strive to obtain all of the education we possibly can. Brigham Young described the scope of the skills and knowledge we might consider cultivating: “Every accomplishment, every polished grace, every useful attainment

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in mathematics, music, and in all science and art belong to the Saints.”³

We do not rely on the arm of flesh, but a steady, experienced arm in the time of need, guided by the Spirit of God, can make a difference: “To be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God.”⁴ This includes learning in useful skills.

Many of us have patriarchal blessings that advise us to cultivate our abilities in a particular area. I would like to share with you some of my own understandings about skills and how they might figure into our ability to perform our earthly missions.

We could begin by asking, “How pervasive are skills in our everyday actions?” Some skills are easy to spot: reading is a skill; driving is a skill; so are walking, speaking, and using a spoon to eat with. You younger students don’t remember how hard that last skill was to master, but those who are parents know how strange this skill is to a new learner—something to reflect on as you clean up the mess the baby made after dinner.

Some skills are more subtle and difficult to spot, like making an accurate diagnosis on a car engine that won’t start. Communicating an idea effectively is a skill; teaching is a skill; and controlling your emotions is a skill.

Some of these less noticeable skills have important applications at times when souls are being influenced for good or in tender moments when spirits are being healed. Giving comfort to a bereaved friend can be helped by knowledge born of experience. Knowing as a parent when to listen to a child and when to talk is a skill that we learn—sometimes from analyzing our own mistakes. Knowing how to be a true and loyal friend to someone who is hard on friends, but really needs them, is a skill.

All of these skills are learned through diligent practice. We begin knowing very little about how to do them. Our first efforts are usually clumsy, and sometimes we make many mistakes before we get it right. Some tasks we

wonder how we can ever do, like apologizing to an angry and confrontational person whom we have offended or giving a talk with a General Authority in the room.

But not knowing how to do something that we have been commanded to do is not an option, so we begin where we are, and we join, as it were, Nephi on the streets of Jerusalem, wondering how to proceed, “not knowing beforehand the things which [we] should do.”⁵ The Spirit leads us along and sustains us, even as we act. Our thoughts blend with knowledge and wisdom from a heavenly source, and our hands are guided in a way that teaches us. We become skilled by acting. By having the faith to act using a beginner’s skills, and by depending on the Lord to magnify our slight abilities, we move forward and we learn something that we didn’t know before. This way of learning corresponds with the description given by Elder Boyd K. Packer, who counseled, “It is the moment when you have gone to the edge of the light and stepped into the darkness to discover that the way is lighted ahead for just a footstep or two.”⁶

Our Father in Heaven constantly asks us to depend on Him to accomplish hard, even impossible things. As we act in faith over and over again, we find that not only has our ability to do things increased, but our faith, and therefore our ability to learn, has increased as well. This is indeed learning by study and by faith.⁷

Skilled performance is a very important manifestation of human knowledge. It is a kind of knowledge that improves with use. We begin learning as a novice and gain new capability every time we exercise a skill. What can we learn about skill by recalling how we learned the skills that we use every day? Let me suggest several things:

First, skill is learned through multiple attempts, over a period of time. Do you recall learning to ride a bike? Learning to swim? Learning to be a brilliant conversationalist on a

first date? It took a few tries to get these things right.

Second, skill learning requires much practice. Not just any kind of practice will do: it must be practice in which the learner can find out how well they did after each attempt. Imagine trying to improve your golf swing on a foggy day. The ball disappears into the fog as soon as it is hit. Did it hook? Or slice? Without knowing where the ball went, it's hard to make an improvement.

Third, you can't learn a new skill just from being told, unless you already possess other very similar skills. A dancer who knows how to perform one step may be able to make minor adjustments to learn a slightly different step, but if the new step is very different, training through practice may be necessary. As a sidebar, consider also the following observation: The more experience a dancer has in learning new steps, the easier it is to learn new steps in general, but practice with feedback is still essential for the new steps.

Fourth, the learning of a new skill requires the integration of skills you already possess. For example, if you don't already know how to add, then that calculus class you are signed up for is going to be hard. Consider dropping.

Fifth, skilled performance consists of more than robotically repeated procedural actions. This is where the topic of skill begins to become more interesting.

A skill is performed slightly differently each time we perform it. This is because the circumstances surrounding the performance change. Skill is the type of human behavior that allows us to adapt our actions to changing circumstances. The next pitch in a baseball game usually depends on the previous pitch, among other things. The pitcher who throws the same pitch every time doesn't win games, as demonstrated in this last World Series.

Sixth, it is important to notice that the exercise of a skill is often the very thing that changes the circumstances.

Skill requires the exercise of judgment, decision making, agency, and problem solving. When we exercise our agency to act righteously, it changes the world around us, setting up new conditions that we then continue to respond to. I am reminded of the generous spirit of Mallory Holtman and Liz Wallace, softball players from Central Washington University, who carried their injured opponent, Sara Tucholsky, around the bases because she had just hit a home run and could not be helped by her teammates.⁸ It is hard not to be affected by the honorable spirit of that act: in the middle of a skilled sports exhibition, these players exercised a skill of a different sort—a saintly skill in which they used judgment, decision making, agency, and problem solving to do something noble and good. If there is anything that the gospel teaches us, it is that we can change the conditions in our lives, our homes, our neighborhoods, and our nations, and by doing so we can change the world. The skills we possess, combined with our faith and guided by the power of the Spirit, are what make that possible.

We learn a little bit at a time. The phrase "line upon line, precept upon precept" applies to learning skilled performance as well as to conceptual knowledge. The development of skills is a time-consuming process that cannot be rushed. Do you remember what it was like to learn typing? First you learned to press specific keys without looking. Then you learned how to do frequent letter combinations. Next you were able to learn subroutines for common words, and finally you were able to type the words in sequence so fluently that you did not have to concentrate on the details of the action. The process of typing had become automatic, and some of you have learned to type at very high rates of speed. (Though not me: I still look at the keys.)

The learning process described here applies to any skill. We learn small actions to the point where we can do them more or less automatically, without thought, and then we

learn how to combine smaller actions into increasingly interesting, useful, and competent combinations of action—action that fits the needs of the moment and that allows us to carry out our desires.

But no matter how automatic the performance of skill subroutines becomes, skilled performance always follows the same pattern: it is a pattern of action followed by decision making. This is a critically important point: one that I would like for you to remember.

Skill is more than just thinking about something: it involves doing, then judging how we did, and then deciding what to do next. It involves knowing when to start, when to stop, what to do, how much to do, and what not to do. It involves judging how well we are doing and how effective our actions are in practice. Skill is the constant interplay of agency and action.

With continued practice of a skill, things speed up, and decision points become less noticeable. This is part of a process of automation that occurs naturally over time. Sometimes skills turn into habits, and we do things without paying sufficient attention. Have you ever gotten into an unfamiliar car and tried to put the key into the steering column, only to discover after three or four unsuccessful tries that the ignition is located on the dashboard?

Here is both the blessing and the cursing of skills. Whatever we have become accustomed to doing, we tend to do naturally and thoughtlessly. If the patterns of behavior we allow ourselves to form are positive, righteous, and uplifting, then our habitual actions will tend to safeguard us. If, on the other hand, we allow ourselves to form habitual patterns of behavior that are negative, self-destructive, or disobedient, or if we are inattentive to where our behavior is leading us, then our actions will take us in directions we will later regret. The important thing to remember is that we choose our actions. Our actions, even our habitual ones, are expressions of our desires.

Perhaps this helps us to understand better this teaching of Alma:

*I know that [God] granteth unto men according to their desire, whether it be unto death or unto life; yea, I know that he allotteth unto men, yea, decreeth unto them decrees which are unalterable, according to their wills, whether they be unto salvation or unto destruction.*⁹

Our wills are often expressed in what we allow to become automatic behavior.

Perhaps it also allows us to understand Nephi's metaphor wherein he described how Satan leads the unwary "by the neck with a flaxen cord, until he bindeth them with his strong cords forever."¹⁰ Treated flax fiber is soft and comfortable to the touch. A light cord of flax might even feel comfortable around the neck, but strong ropes anciently were made of soft flaxen cords woven into strong cables that were hard or even impossible to break. Light habits that feel pleasant can seem harmless at first, but over time they become strong restraints on our actions. In the same way, a seemingly small habit that has become automatic can become a chain that captivates us.

I would add one more observation about skill to the list I was making earlier. It is that if you are attentive, you learn something new from performing the skill every time you perform it. Not only does performing a skill change the circumstances around you, but it also changes you as well.

This marvelous human capacity to choose to change is a tool for us to use to grow and to become. It therefore suggests that repentance is one of those essential skills that we must learn. In the Doctrine and Covenants we are told to "say nothing but repentance unto this generation."¹¹

What are the skills of a Saint? Elder Neal A. Maxwell described how we acquire many saintly skills through the experiences of life:

Built . . . into the seemingly ordinary experiences of life are opportunities for us to acquire such eternal attributes as love, mercy, meekness, patience, and submissiveness and to develop and sharpen such skills as how to communicate, motivate, delegate, and manage our time and talents and our thoughts in accordance with eternal priorities. These attributes and skills are portable; they are never obsolete and will be much needed in the next world.

How often have you and I really pondered just what it is, therefore, that will rise with us in the resurrection? Our intelligence will rise with us, meaning not simply our I.Q., but our capacity to receive and to apply truth. Our talents, attributes, and skills will rise with us, certainly also our capacity to learn, our degree of self-discipline, and our capacity to work. . . .

. . . It is left to us . . . to make the interplay of our time and talent bring about the development of the key eternal attributes and the everlasting skills.¹²

In his October 2009 conference address, Elder Richard G. Scott gave an intimate view into his own personal experience with the further development of the spiritual skill of obtaining and capturing knowledge through revelation. He explained that this ability is obtained through practice:

I am convinced that there is no simple formula or technique that would immediately allow you to master the ability to be guided by the voice of the Spirit. Our Father expects you to learn how to obtain that divine help by exercising faith in Him and His Holy Son, Jesus Christ. Were you to receive inspired guidance just for the asking, you would become weak and ever more dependent on Them. They know that essential personal growth will come as you struggle to learn how to be led by the Spirit.

Elder Scott then described how the ability to receive revelation grows with practice:

What may appear initially to be a daunting task will be much easier to manage over time as you

consistently strive to recognize and follow feelings prompted by the Spirit. Your confidence in the direction you receive from the Holy Ghost will also become stronger.

Elder Scott next showed that the process of learning from revelation possesses the basic structure of a skill—the repetitive cycle of action and decision making:

Spirituality yields two fruits. The first is inspiration to know what to do. The second is power, or the capacity to do it. These two capacities come together.

At this point, Elder Scott described his own experience in the further development of a skill that he has been learning throughout his life and continues to perfect. The experience began in response to the spiritual atmosphere set by a humble teacher:

His sincerity, purity of intent, and love permitted a spiritual strength to envelop the room. I was deeply touched. Then I began to receive personal impressions as an extension of the principles taught by that humble instructor. They were personal and related to my assignments in the area. They came in answer to my prolonged, prayerful efforts to learn.

As each impression came, I carefully wrote it down. In the process, I was given precious truths that I greatly needed in order to be a more effective servant of the Lord. The details of the communication are sacred and, like a patriarchal blessing, were for my individual benefit. I was given specific directions, instructions, and conditioned promises that have beneficially altered the course of my life.

Elder Scott's learning continued during a second lesson in which the manner of another teacher played less of a role, illustrating that the skill was being taught by the Holy Ghost, not the teacher:

In that environment, strong impressions began to flow to me again. I wrote them down. The

message included specific counsel on how to become more effective as an instrument in the hands of the Lord. I received such an outpouring of impressions that were so personal that I felt it was not appropriate to record them in the midst of a Sunday School class. I sought a more private location, where I continued to write the feelings that flooded into my mind and heart as faithfully as possible. After each powerful impression was recorded, I pondered the feelings I had received to determine if I had accurately expressed them in writing. As a result, I made a few minor changes to what had been written. Then I studied their meaning and application in my own life.

Subsequently I prayed, reviewing with the Lord what I thought I had been taught by the Spirit. When a feeling of peace came, I thanked Him for the guidance given. I was then impressed to ask, “Was there yet more to be given?” I received further impressions, and the process of writing down the impressions, pondering, and praying for confirmation was repeated. Again I was prompted to ask, “Is there more I should know?” And there was. When that last, most sacred experience was concluded, I had received some of the most precious, specific, personal direction one could hope to obtain in this life. Had I not responded to the first impressions and recorded them, I would not have received the last, most precious guidance.

Elder Scott ended his talk by saying, “I testify that you can personally learn to master the principles of being guided by the Spirit.”¹³

There are so many skills that we as members of Christ’s church can desire. There is so much that we need to learn for ourselves, through the application of faith, about how to learn a skill and how to teach it to others. And there is so little time. But I testify that the Spirit sustains us in learning gradually, step-by-step, the skills that we need to fulfill our missions in life.

I pray that we will learn the wisdom in this teaching of President David O. McKay:

*Gaining knowledge is one thing, and applying it [is] quite another. Wisdom is the right application of knowledge, and true education—the education for which the Church stands—is the application of knowledge to the development of a noble and Godlike character.*¹⁴

I believe this describes how we come to develop the skills of a Saint. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Neal A. Maxwell, “Discipleship and Scholarship,” *BYU Studies* 32, no. 3 (summer 1992): 6; quoting LeRoy S. Wirthlin, “Discovery: Joseph Smith’s Surgeon,” *Ensign*, March 1978, 59; see also LeRoy S. Wirthlin, “Joseph Smith’s Boyhood Operation: An 1813 Surgical Success,” *BYU Studies* 21, no. 2 (spring 1981): 131–54.
2. Maxwell, “Discipleship and Scholarship,” 6.
3. *JD* 10:224.
4. 2 Nephi 9:29.
5. 1 Nephi 4:6.
6. Boyd K. Packer, “Speaking Today: The Candle of the Lord,” *Ensign*, January 1983, 54; from a talk given at a seminar for new mission presidents, 25 June 1982.
7. See D&C 88:118.
8. Softball game played in Ellensburg, Washington, between Central Washington University and Western Oregon University, 26 April 2008.
9. Alma 29:4.
10. 2 Nephi 26:22.
11. D&C 6:9.
12. Elder Neal A. Maxwell, “Grounded, Rooted, Established, and Settled,” BYU devotional address, 15 September 1981.
13. Richard G. Scott, “To Acquire Spiritual Guidance,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 6–9.
14. David O. McKay, CR, April 1968, 93–94.