

Live Right Now

GERRIT W. GONG

Brothers and sisters, isn't language interesting?

For example, a bus station is where a bus stops. A train station is where a train stops. On my desk is a work station. It is where . . .

At church we hope those who sit on the stand understand how long we can stand to sit.

When they grow on vines, blackberries when green are red. Wireless BlackBerries when read in class make green instructors blue.

The title of my talk—Live Right Now—also has dual meaning. “Live right now” can mean “live—right now.” It can also mean “live right—now.” Both meanings testify to the supernal blessings of choice—what the scriptures call “moral agency” (D&C 101:78).

“Live—right now” doesn't mean eat, drink, and be merry for my class project isn't due until tomorrow! It means that, while we learn from the past and plan for the future, we make decisions in the present. The nature of mortality is we live—right now.

“Live right—now” is also key to joy in both time and eternity. The metrics of faith, repentance, covenants, and receptiveness to the Holy Ghost are all and always tied to our living righteously. Today's choices shape tomorrow's decisions.

Choice is as eternal as we are. Our opportunity to exercise moral agency in mortality is one of God's great gifts. Yet we make many of life's most important choices before we are constitutionally qualified to run for Congress (age 25)! Faith, marriage, career—these and other important decisions loom as large as an 18-wheeler barreling toward you at breakneck speed, and you have the uneasy feeling objects in the rearview mirror are even larger than they appear.

Choices—we may put them off but we can't escape them. Choices reveal, define, and refine us. We have the gift of the Holy Ghost. When we make mistakes—and we all do—there is always a way back. And the way back is the way forward. The Savior's Atonement helps us see the Lord's promises fulfilled in our lives.

As part of living right now, let me speak in turn about choice, promptings, and promises.

Gerrit W. Gong was assistant to the president for Planning and Assessment at Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 20 March 2007.

Choice

First, choice.

I once substituted in a teenage Sunday School class. These were good kids, but they challenged me as I walked in. “Brother Gong,” they said, “Sunday School is boring. We’ve heard everything before.”

I thought for a moment, then asked, “Have you ever talked about the quintessential existential dilemmas of moral agency?”

The class said, “Huh?”

I asked if they were willing to learn together.

They were, so we did.

Quintessential means in a “pure and most concentrated form”; *existential* means “grounded in the experience of existence”; and *dilemma*—well, you know a dilemma means “a problem involving a difficult choice.”

So quintessential existential dilemmas (QEDs, for short) are the challenges inherent in making life’s most important and defining choices. The terminology may be new, but the dilemmas essential to real choice are as old as the Fall. Maybe new words can help us think more deeply about our choices as we seek to live right in the right now.

Please remember mortality involves, well, real choices! “There is an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11) so we can act for ourselves, being enticed by the one (sweet) or the other (bitter) (see 2 Nephi 2:15–16). The remarkable truth “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:25) assures us existential choice need not engender forlornness, anguish, and despair (as described by Jean-Paul Sartre) but, ultimately, the joy for which men and women are.

Let’s consider four illustrative examples of what I mean by QEDs.

First QED: We are enjoined to “be anxiously engaged in a good cause” (D&C 58:27) but not to run faster than we have strength (see Mosiah 4:27; D&C 10:4). Often everything happens at once: big class assignment, family

home evening, service project, extra work shift—and the cute guy or girl on the second row in *American Heritage* finally smiled shyly and asked if you could get together. How do we diligently do all things “in wisdom and order” (Mosiah 4:27)?

Another QED: We know we should pray but may not know what to pray for. The scriptures instruct that we “must not perform any thing unto the Lord save in the first place [we] shall pray unto the Father in the name of Christ, that he will consecrate [our] performance unto [our good]” (2 Nephi 32:9). Yet the scriptures also remind us we do not know “what we should pray for as we ought” (Romans 8:26). Left on our own, we quickly discover “there is none that doeth good, no, not one” (Psalm 14:3; see also Moroni 10:25, Matthew 19:17, Mark 10:18).

We do understand neither waiting to be told all things nor doing everything on our own leads to happiness. Those who wait for absolute inspiration find themselves paralyzed, sometimes susceptible to deception from uninspired sources. Those who never seek Heavenly Father’s inspiration sometimes get what they thought they wanted. You know the expression: “Be careful what you ask for.”

Choosing to trust in God takes faith. The best guide of all as we seek to choose faith in every footstep is the whisperings of the Holy Spirit. Teaches President Boyd K. Packer:

Once you really determine to follow that guide, your testimony will grow and you will find provisions set out along the way in unexpected places, as evidence that someone knew that you would be traveling that way. [“Spiritual Crocodiles,” Ensign, May 1976, 31]

On occasion, in unexpected places, I have been grateful—as you have been—to find such provisions.

A third kind of QED reflects our sincere desire to submit our will to Heavenly Father.

How do we say “Thy will be done” and truly mean “I want what He wants”?

Remember the great prophet Abraham? He was told he would miraculously have a son and then commanded to sacrifice that son.

While they were traveling together in the Holy Land, Professor Truman Madsen once asked President Hugh B. Brown:

“Why . . . was Abraham commanded to go to Mount Moriah and offer his only hope of posterity.”

*It was clear that [President Brown], nearly ninety, had thought and prayed and wept over that question before. [President Brown] finally said, “Abraham needed to learn something about Abraham.” [Truman G. Madsen, *The Highest in Us* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1978), 49]*

Happily, most choices are not Abrahamic tests. But mortal choices let us learn and choose something about ourselves. In a sense, mortality is the ultimate “choose your own adventure.” Each choice opens new opportunities to choose and closes others.

As we choose the Lord and obey His commandments, we come to understand and accept His will. Indeed, as we

reconcile [our]selves to the will of God, and not to the will of the devil and the flesh; [we] remember, after [we] are reconciled unto God, that it is only in and through the grace of God that [we] are saved. [2 Nephi 10:24]

In chapter 10 of Helaman, Nephi became so faithful and obedient the Lord promised, “All things shall be done unto thee according to thy word, for thou shalt not ask that which is contrary to my will” (Helaman 10:5; see also D&C 46:30).

Each semester our student stake executive secretary and clerks schedule many temple recommend interviews. Over the years Vince Shrader, Clinton Sandy, Hyrum Wright, Jeremy Johnson, Paul Orgill, Stephen Ricks, Andrew

McNabb, and others have served faithfully. I love meeting all our members, including happily engaged couples.

May I share something I’ve observed about what makes happy couples happy? Happy couples CTR the DTR. They Choose The Right in Defining The Relationship. They let the spiritual lead the physical. In ways small and large, whether just starting to date, courting, or during their engagement, happy couples set distinct, appropriate bounds before marriage that bless all aspects of their lives—now and later. Living right now makes possible living happily later.

In interviews I sometimes say, “My purpose as your priesthood leader in asking these questions—about testimony, tithing, the law of chastity, etc.—is not to keep you from entering the temple. It is to help you know that when you are in the house of the Lord you are worthy to receive every blessing pronounced upon you.”

The Lord wants us to qualify for every blessing. Indeed, “There is a law, . . . And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (D&C 130:20–21).

Never underestimate seemingly small decisions. This includes how we choose to dress, speak, or otherwise portray ourselves.

In a Sunday School class in our student stake, I asked, “Do you protect your credit card and financial identity?” Every hand went up. I then asked, “Do you protect your spiritual identity in how you dress, speak, or portray yourself online?” I invited volunteers to share their MySpace or Facebook profiles. Would you feel comfortable showing your profile in Sunday School—or on the big screen at this devotional?

What would your parents or bishop, or your current or future spouse or children, think about you spiritually if they saw the profile you use today?

By the way, many employers now review profiles of and other online information about

prospective employees before hiring them. Many screen names are functional or fun. But how would an employer feel about hiring winkydink cutiepie pinkygirl hotty14 to write important legal briefs? Would they hire hotstuff dabomb rm34 to put a mature face on the firm's new regional office?

Life doesn't stop while we wait for answers. As a member of our student stake put it, "The pioneers received inspiration as the wagon wheels turned." Remember the Lord's counsel:

Let us cheerfully do all things that lie in our power; and then may we stand still, with the utmost assurance, to see the salvation of God, and for his arm to be revealed. [D&C 123:17]

President Gordon B. Hinckley's life is a testimony of how to both pray and work. "Get on your knees and ask for help, and then get up and go to work, and you'll be able to find your way through almost any situation," he says. His good advice for university students and for all of us is also, "If you go to bed at 10:00 and get up by 6:00 a.m., things will work out for you." (In Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996], 167.)

My wife, Susan, and I courted across two hemispheres. She was teaching in Provo. I was studying at Oxford University in England while trying to learn everything I could about her from across the Atlantic Ocean. Call it "distance education" of the best kind. It's one reason I can honestly say I earned a PhD in international relations.

Both Susan and I knew what we wanted, but we also sought the Lord's confirming inspiration.

I prayed many times before I found the right way to ask the right question in a way that felt right for me. It was not just "Should I marry Susan?" That is, "Please tell me what to do." It was also to say humbly, "I want to ask Susan to marry me. Please confirm this decision, which

I have made with all my heart." We waited and listened with faith for His quiet confirmation—answers that come according to each varied circumstance.

During his final visit to BYU, Elder Neal A. Maxwell quoted lines of verse given him by Professor John Sorenson. The verses describe

*a great stallion at full gallop in a meadow, who—
at his master's voice—seizes up to a stunned but
instant halt. . . .*

. . . only the velvet ears

prick forward, awaiting the next order.

[Mary Karr, "Who the Meek Are Not," *Atlantic Monthly* 289, no. 5 (May 2002), 64]

Said Elder Maxwell, "Do you see a new picture of meekness being at 'full gallop' but with 'velvet ears'?" (Neal A. Maxwell, "Blending Research and Revelation," remarks at BYU President's Leadership Council meeting, 19 March 2004).

A fourth quintessential existential dilemma: How do I distinguish between promptings of the Spirit and my own personal feelings? In this month's *Ensign*, Elder Dallin H. Oaks reminds us humility precedes inspiration (see "Humility Precedes Inspiration," *Ensign*, March 2007, 61; quoted from Oaks, "I Have a Question," *Ensign*, June 1983, 27).

Humbly seeking inspiration while fully obeying all the commandments will help us determine if we are attracted to that cute girl or guy by spiritual prompting or as a response to a Madison Avenue perfume or aftershave. It can help us know when we are giving or receiving a priesthood blessing that what we are saying or hearing is not only what our own heart may earnestly want (or not want) but is in fact the will, mind, word, and voice of the Lord (see D&C 68:3–4).

By definition, QEDs involve real choices. We choose not only between good and evil but often between good and good. Happily, we are not alone as we seek to live right now.

Promptings

Promptings from Heavenly Father through the Holy Ghost can help us live right now. I am grateful Heavenly Father respects perfectly our agency and at the same time—in circumstances and at times He knows best—also prompts and guides us.

In the spirit of a devotional, let me briefly share four personal experiences where promptings taught me how the Lord will guide us as we make our own best choices while seeking inspiration.

First, promptings sometimes open unanticipated opportunities to help others.

With us here today is a wonderful woman who shared this experience. She arrived at her local supermarket and felt prompted to enter through a different door than the one she normally used. She found herself in a less familiar section of the store.

There she couldn't help overhearing a conversation. It went something like this.

"Can't we get jam? I like jam with peanut butter. Besides, you chose last time."

"Maybe so, but we need more protein. Cold cuts have more protein than jam."

Two young men wearing white shirts and name tags and holding a small calculator were confronting a tight missionary food budget. While cold cuts or jam may not constitute a classic quintessential existential dilemma, the dilemma of choosing cold cuts or jam was real.

The generous woman said, "Elders, please put both the cold cuts and jam in your basket. I would be so happy if you would let me pay for your food this week."

She told me, "I was glad Heavenly Father prompted me to go through a different door and allowed me to help those faithful elders in a small way."

Second, promptings sometimes come when our hearts go out to someone else.

While serving as a branch president in another country, I interviewed for baptism a

young man with a strong testimony. He had traveled many miles over many hours on a trip I knew he could probably afford to make only once.

As we discussed the law of chastity, he hung his head. "I want to be baptized," he said, "but I am living with someone and we're not married."

As my heart went out to him, an impression came. It was very clear: "Ask him what he means by being married." I said, "Please tell me what you mean by being married."

He said, "Well, we went down to the government office and registered as a married couple, but we didn't have money for a family wedding banquet."

"Wait! You are married in the government's eyes, and not married only in the sense you haven't had a family wedding banquet?"

"Yes," he said, "we are legally married."

That worthy young husband was baptized. As I recall, there was later even a family wedding banquet.

Third, promptings sometimes comfort or prepare us for things Heavenly Father knows are coming.

Some years ago I awoke one morning with a clear but curious impression: I should use frequent-flier miles to upgrade my parents' airplane tickets for their visit to our family in Virginia. I had the tickets upgraded, then forgot completely about it.

During the visit my father was very tired one afternoon but wanted to go with me as I ran errands. Although I thought he should really stay and rest, I happily agreed for us to run the errands together. Somewhere between the laundry and the grocery store, I had a quiet feeling my father would not visit again.

A few months later I was attending a business conference in Kyoto, Japan, when I received word my father had unexpectedly died. I cried for many days. But, as I looked back, I realized I had been lovingly prepared in advance. Earlier small promptings regarding

plane tickets and running errands later provided great comfort.

Fourth, promptings sometimes come at the very instant we need them to help us address questions important to someone else.

Once, in a country with customs and beliefs different from those of the U.S., I was riding in a car with a fine leader of another religion. He said, “Dr. Gong, I have a test for you.”

I thought he was joking, but he wasn’t. I thought he would move to another topic, but he didn’t. He was quite serious.

“Imagine you are traveling in my country,” he said. “You are invited inside a very humble home. You’re offered a small glass of lime juice to drink. What do you do?”

At first I wondered if he were testing whether I dared drink the local juice. His was a more difficult question than that.

I knew the family was offering their best. I thought, perhaps I should thank the family but not drink the lime juice. This would acknowledge their generosity but not consume the precious juice. But might they feel insulted that I thought their offering too little or not good enough?

Alternatively, I thought maybe I should thank the family and drink the juice. This would acknowledge their generosity but could be awkward if they felt obliged to bring more juice—which they might not have. All this went through my mind in a flash.

“So what do you think?” my host asked again.

I was silent for a minute. Then, with a prayer in my heart, I opened my mouth, not yet knowing what I would say. It was then it came. What I said surprised us both.

“I would thank the family profusely,” I said. “Then I would drink part of the juice and say, ‘Your generosity is so great, I am unable to finish.’”

He clapped his hands. “You understand the hearts of my people,” he said warmly. In a way that surprised and moved me, it mattered to this great leader that someone understood.

Sometimes it is “right now,” in the instant, that we learn things important to someone else (see D&C 100:6).

I share these personal examples—which we each have in our lives—to testify Heavenly Father loves us more and knows us better than we do ourselves. We can seek the guiding whisperings of the Holy Spirit. We can be grateful on occasion for pre-positioned provisions along our path. We can “gallop with velvet ears.” And we can make our best decisions knowing—on occasions and in circumstances He determines—His promptings will bless us and those around us by opening choices we would not otherwise have known.

Promises

As we make our best choices and follow guiding promptings in a consistent effort to live right now, we unlock the Lord’s promises in our lives.

One of the Lord’s promises is that His Son will be our Savior and Redeemer.

Human choices are inevitably incomplete and incorrect, and they often have unintended, or even sometimes destructive consequences.

Human choices require atonement.

We have all had experiences where we tried to be helpful and weren’t. I once arrived early for priesthood meeting. Thinking I could help ready our classroom, I erased the blackboard dense with writing. As he began our lesson, our dedicated instructor said, with surprise but without criticism, “I came early and put our lesson on the board, but somehow it’s been erased.” The class turned out fine, but I remember the forbearance of our priesthood teacher who, incidentally, is today’s U.S. Senate majority leader.

That’s a simple example. What about the roommate who inadvertently hurts the tender feelings of another roommate in a way that causes her to stop coming to church? What about the friend who accidentally fatally injures his best friend in a car accident?

In each of our lives things happen that make us stop and consider what is most important. A heart attack, a near drowning, a suicide—the sudden jolt of death, injury, or major changes make us seek at-one-ment. At these tender moments, the four things that matter most find expression as “thank you,” “I love you,” “please forgive me,” and “I forgive you” (Ira Byock, *The Four Things That Matter Most* [New York: Free Press, 2004], 3).

Each of these phrases is an echo of the Atonement. In each we feel our Savior’s love for us as we extend His love and forgiveness to others. Each eases pain, offers hope and comfort, and reconciles injustices and hurts that come from living in a world of sticks and stones.

And we don’t have to wait for death or trauma. The Savior’s Atonement can infuse our role relationships, experiences, and knowledges right now. Our lives become richer, more peaceful, and more whole as we say with all our hearts “thank you,” “I love you,” “please forgive me,” and “I forgive you.”

Atonement ultimately comes because of our Savior’s “infinite and eternal,” “great and last sacrifice” (Alma 34:13–14). He knows “according to the flesh how to succor his people” (Alma 7:12). He can heal us. He can comfort and bless those hurt by our mistakes, by our imperfect choices.

As we always remember Him and keep His commandments and always have His Spirit to be with us (see D&C 20:77), we recognize another great scriptural promise:

Every soul who forsaketh his sins and cometh unto me, and calleth on my name, and obeyeth my voice, and keepeth my commandments, shall see my face and know that I am. [D&C 93:1]

Face matters. We face the facts. We *Face the Nation*. As the musical based on Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* concludes, Eponine, Fantine, and Jean Valjean sing together “To love another person is to see the face of God” (*Les Misérables*,

finale, act 2 [French lyrics, Alain Boublil; English lyrics, Herbert Kretzmer; music, Claude-Michel Schönberg]).

Do you know the scriptures contain by one count some 635 references to *face* and some 22 references to *face-to-face*? This includes precious accounts where great prophets including Moses, Abraham, Jacob, Enoch, the brother of Jared, Moroni, and the Prophet Joseph Smith all saw and spoke with God “face to face.”

Elder David A. Bednar recently testified, “The scriptures contain the words of Christ and are a reservoir of living water.” He taught us how to read, study, search, and feast upon the words of Christ (“A Reservoir of Living Water,” fireside address, 4 February 2007). I am grateful I can seek and ponder connections, patterns, and themes such as “face” and “face-to-face.”

In our day some say an unknowable God has no face. Some say God must not exist because scientific measures do not detect Him. Some say God exists only as an idea or spirit. How blessed we are to know He has a name, a voice, a face (see D&C 93:1), indeed, “a body of flesh and bones [only glorified]; the Son also” (D&C 130:22).

We approach our Heavenly Father in prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. To me, this too is a wonderful quintessential existential dilemma. We do not presume overfamiliarity as we speak of or with our Heavenly Father. But neither do we so fear His glory and perfection that we mistakenly think Him unapproachable or distant. He invites us to come to Him, and we do so on bended knee as His children.

“We know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

Conclusion

Let me conclude by offering five suggestions for how we can live right now:

1. Ponder your patriarchal blessing. Notice where Heavenly Father may give specific

direction and where He gives only general guidance and expects you to learn how to make righteous choices.

2. Ask yourself, *Are there things in my life I should start, stop, or continue doing?* Seemingly small actions or attitudes carried on over time can set important long-term trajectories. “Out of small things proceedeth that which is great” (D&C 64:33).

3. Study the lives of the great prophets, including Abraham. Ask how you increase your understanding, trust, and experience with the Lord so as to be prepared for challenges and opportunities in your life.

4. Review circumstances in which you received guiding promptings and how you responded to those promptings.

5. Count your many blessings. Look for ways to add “thank you,” “I love you,” “please forgive me,” and “I forgive you” to your daily life.

May we raise our faces toward the promised day when we shall see His face and know that He is, as He encircles us in His eternal arms of mercy and safety (see Alma 5:33, 34:16; see also 3 Nephi 9:14).

Our journey complete, we will then see no longer “through a glass, darkly; but . . . face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12), knowing as we are known, grateful for choices, promptings, and promises that invite us, with a fullness of joy, to live right now.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.