

It Is Time to “Get Real”

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I recently heard a sentence that caught my attention: It is better to *be* than to *seem*. I’ve been thinking about this idea—about what it means and how it applies.

Hamlet’s mother asked him why he was so concerned about the death of his father, “Why seems it so particular with thee?”

Hamlet answered, “Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not *seems*” (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 1, scene 2, lines 75–76). I have come to feel with Hamlet that it *is* better to be than to seem. Merely *seeming* thwarts our development. We cannot truly grow if we remain inside an illusion. But *being* or *being real*, as taught by the gospel, encourages rather than stifles our relationship with God and encourages rather than stifles our relationships with others, including dating relationships. In fact, there are many good reasons for saying it is better to be than to seem.

Here’s an example: A grandfather had just finished telling his grandson a story when the little boy asked, “Grandpa, was that a true story or were you just preaching?” The little boy was innocent in asking the question, but the underlying assumption in the *way* he asked it is that preaching, or religion, is not something to be taken seriously. A true story, on the

other hand, is *real*. The idea that preaching is not real, that it doesn’t apply to real life, can lead to superficial thinking about religion in general and about vital religious concepts—such as repentance, specifically.

An example of this kind of superficial thinking about repentance is when a person sins while planning to repent. As stated in the Church booklet “For the Strength of Youth,” “Some people knowingly break God’s commandments [even while] they plan to repent before they go on a mission or receive the sacred covenants and ordinances of the temple” (p. 17). There is something especially perverse about “planning to repent” in the very act of transgression. This attitude twists the sublime source of our healing until it actually inflicts *more* sickness, like poisoning the water in a hospital for wounded soldiers. That is wounding the soldiers twice.

This kind of shallow thinking can begin early. I know well two brothers I’ll call Steve and Scott, ages nine and seven. Steve had been baptized; Scott would be baptized soon. One

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day their father caught Scott heading for the candy counter at the neighborhood grocery store with a quarter that did not belong to him. As Scott and his dad sat down to talk about the seriousness of stealing, Scott was at first very penitent. But then he looked up brightly and said, “But Dad, Steve said it’s okay to steal things until you’re eight!”

Startled, the father went to find Steve, his young theologian, to ask him why he would say such a thing. Steve replied confidently with a shrug, “Yeah, that’s what I told him. When he’s eight, he’ll be baptized and all his sins will be washed away. So I say, Live it up!”

Sometimes, while preparing to attend BYU or to go on a mission or to be married in the temple, a young person can be tempted to “live it up,” so long as he or she “just repents” before the deadline. Paul describes these foolish ones as wanting “to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season” (Hebrews 11:25; emphasis added). But when the season ends, as seasons inevitably do, the stain of sin is still there when the pleasures have turned to ashes. Some even feel it is their “right” to romp in the mud of transgression right up to the moment they take their spiritual shower of repentance.

This kind of thinking is like acting in a dress rehearsal, unrealistically relaxing in the knowledge that the real performance is not now but in the future.

Prince Hal, a character in Shakespeare’s *King Henry the Fourth, Part 1*, is just such a dress rehearsal actor. His father, King Henry IV, desperately wants Hal to prepare to become king (like many fathers want their sons to prepare for missions); however, Hal is off in Eastcheap at the Boar’s Head Tavern “living it up” with Falstaff and his other low-life friends—wine, women, and jokes. Hal is deliberately planning to play for a while. But then, dramatically, he will “imitate the sun,” and when he (and listen to this language) “please[s] again to *be* himself,” he will break “through the foul and ugly mists of vapors that did *seem* to

strangle him.” Hal somehow thinks that his repentance will then make him look downright heroic. He will be “like bright metal on a sullen ground,” the “reformation glitt’ring o’er my fault, Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes” than if he had not lived it up at all (see act 1, scene 2; emphasis added). Hal is far more interested in his future *looking* good than he is in his present *being* good.

Planning to sin now in the rehearsal and repent later in real life is like walking across the stage of your life with the trapdoor double size and wide open.

How important is reality? Jacob, that sensitive, poetic prophet, tells us:

For the Spirit speaketh the truth and lieth not. Wherefore, it speaketh of things as they really are, and of things as they really will be; wherefore, these things are manifested unto us plainly, for the salvation of our souls. [Jacob 4:13]

What is the risk of *not* seeing things “as they really are”? Just the salvation of our souls. We may indeed be strangled by those “foul and ugly mists of vapors.” Conversely, what is the *benefit* of seeing things as they really are? Just the salvation of our souls. We know deep down, as Prince Hal did, who we really are and what we really ought to be doing. It is time to get real.

Lowell L. Bennion, a great teacher, was once asked, “Is a person better off if he rebels and then repents or if he never rebels at all?” Brother Bennion replied, “It is better to strive to live righteously than to give way to weakness and have to fight to come back.” He continued, “I have never known a truly penitent person who was glad for his sins. They are never a pleasant memory, and memory is part of the stuff of which life is made.”

Another reason, as Brother Bennion put it, is:

*The repentant life appears to be so beautiful, one is tempted to rationalize his weakness or desire in order to be a penitent hero. The danger here is that one never knows his strength or how he might feel in a different style of life. He may lose his will to repent once involved in the passing pleasures of unwholesome living. ["Q & A," *New Era*, April 1972, p. 9]*

Sadly, those like Prince Hal, who frivolously engage in what they think is a penalty-free romping time, may discover too late that they cannot wash every stain from their clothes and hands. Of course, repentance, when it is genuine and complete, can restore our spiritual standing before God. But even then, the entanglements of sin—the bent fenders and the broken hearts, the addictions and the lost opportunities, the unwanted children and the unfortunate marriages, the bills to pay and the fences to mend—these may never wash away.

Moreover, once sin's swift current carries us downstream, we can't always just turn around at will and swim back, against the current, to our point of beginning. We don't have that much control over our lives. For example, one of the most exciting football games in BYU history was the so-called Miracle Bowl in 1980 against SMU. The Cougars were behind four touchdowns with only minutes to play. Then, amazingly, they came roaring back to win the game with an onside kick and a Hail Mary pass in the final seconds.

The next year, in an early game, BYU fell far behind against a very strong team. Our ten-year old daughter said, "You know, this is a lot more fun for everybody—let the other team get way ahead and then just pass them up like we did last year!" But it wasn't to be—the Cougars were soundly defeated, and our daughter had to rethink her philosophy about the thrill of coming from behind. She found she had to get real about playing against tough competition. And Satan is a tough competitor.

The deadly AIDS epidemic illustrates graphically the tragedy of ignoring the consequences of sin. For example, some well-traveled athletes and entertainers have been stunned to find that, because of their sexual promiscuity, they are now infected with the AIDS virus. Some of them recently discovered that their carefree lifestyles could cost them their lives. And beyond that, they may have unknowingly infected their spouses and children, those who mean the most to them. Last year, in a *Sports Illustrated* interview, Magic Johnson said his greatest fear in having AIDS is that he might have unwittingly infected his new wife, Cookie, and the baby she was expecting. But upon such a realization, even if one were to repent, there is no way to call back the seeds of destruction scattered in the past.

We cannot live a high-risk life as if it were just an illusion—or a rehearsal. As the apostle James said of people jet-setting carelessly through life:

We will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain:

Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour [that word again], that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. [James 4:13–14]

It is time to get real.

Some may rationalize their sinning or wanting to sin by saying, "If I have sinned, then I will be better able to understand and help others who are repenting to overcome their sins." Lowell Bennion refuted this false reasoning when he said:

The only life free of sin known among men was that of the Savior. Did his life suffer from its strength and purity?

The rest of us will know weakness and sin without seeking them out. In fact, despite our best efforts, there will be failures and sinful acts of

omission and commission. [Bennion, “Q & A,” pp. 9–10]

One of my students underscored Brother Bennion’s point when he wrote in a personal essay:

No sin will [in and of itself] make one wiser. Earlier in this semester a roommate came home drunk, telling me that he could relate to kids in drug rehab because he used to be a drug addict. If that were true, then Christ would have been a better Savior if he had been a sinner. We know that this is not true.

And, finally, planning to sin and then repent is an affront to the Savior because it assumes that we control our own forgiveness. While we must do all we can do to be worthy of Christ’s grace, we cannot turn that miraculous power on and off like a water faucet. He loves us no matter what we do, but he forgives only the honest in heart—and on his terms, not on ours. Because we lack the power to compensate fully for the effects of our sins, we are utterly dependent on Jesus Christ. Without his holy atonement, no amount of agonizing repentance could return us to God’s presence. We dare not trifle with so sacred a reality. But the Good News is, when we do fully repent in the honesty of a broken heart and contrite spirit—no seeming, no pretending—he will do all the rest. Thank God, literally, that is under *his* control, not ours; for only he has enough power to make our scarlet sins be white as snow.

To be is also better than to seem in dating relationships. You want to appear to be the most beautiful, or the most handsome, the smartest (or at least to be able to speak a coherent sentence), the funniest, or the most sincere—in other words, to put on your best face. As someone said, “Be sincere, whether you mean it or not.” At times the face we put on for other people can become a facade,

another way of seeming, a mask to hide behind. How can you avoid the seeming and encourage the real being in dating so that things as they really are can be the basis for your relationships with friends of the opposite sex?

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, he did not bring the Ten Suggestions, he brought the Ten Commandments. I’m not bringing ten commandments but nine practical suggestions about how you might find fulfilled, romantic reality.

First, be your own best self. An eighteen-year-old young woman I know recently got up her courage to ask a mighty senior, a guy she’d had a crush on for weeks, to a big preference dance. The day before the dance she came to her mother in obvious frustration.

“Mom, what am I going to do?” she asked, her brow furrowed. “My face looks terrible. Look at these zits! You could do a dot-to-dot. Besides that, what am I going to talk about? I don’t know what to say. He’ll think I’m stupid.”

Her mother tried not just to comfort her but to teach her: “Just be yourself. Maybe it would help to look at the conversation from his point of view. Talk about things in which you both have some interest. That way you can be yourself and still be interested in him. Don’t worry so much about him being a ‘date.’ Think of him first as a friend.”

Second, during your dating, please be emotionally honest in expressing affection, because those expressions must also involve being, not just seeming. Imagine that same little boy I quoted earlier seeing his grandparents exchange a kiss, then later asking, “Was that real love, Grandpa, or were you just kissing?”

Sometimes you are not as careful as you might be about when, how, and to whom you show affection. The desire for that expression can be motivated by forces and needs other than true love. In addition, even when—or especially when—true love may be present,

that is only more reason to nourish love's integrity as you look toward the genuine, lasting fulfillment of your longing for real love. Erich Fromm put it this way:

Desire can be stimulated by the anxiety of aloneness, by the wish to conquer or be conquered, by vanity, by the wish to hurt and even to destroy, as much as it can be stimulated by love. It seems that sexual desire can easily blend with and be stimulated by any strong emotion, of which love is only one. Because sexual desire is in the minds of most people coupled with the idea of love, they are easily misled to conclude that they love each other when they want each other physically. . . . [But] if [this] desire . . . is not stimulated by [real] love, . . . it . . . leaves strangers as far apart as they were before—sometimes it makes them ashamed of each other, or even makes them hate each other, because when the illusion has gone they feel their estrangement even more markedly than before. [The Art of Loving (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), pp. 45–46]

In short, save your kisses—you might need them some day. Remember also that a kiss symbolizing love and respect is different from a kiss of self-centered passion. When you are given entrance to the heart of a trusting young friend, know that you stand on holy ground. In such a place you must be honest—real—with yourself and with your friend about love and the expression of its symbols.

Third, be friends first. Lowell Bennion once said that relationships between young men and women should be built like a pyramid. The base of the pyramid is friendship. The ascending layers are built of such dimensions as time, understanding, respect, and restraint. At the top of the pyramid is a glittering little mystery called romance. When weary travelers in the desert see from afar that glitter on top of the pyramid, they may not realize all that must lie beneath the jewel to give it such prominence and hold it so high. A pyramid won't stand up if you stand it on its point instead of on its

base. So, be friends first and sweethearts later, not the other way around. That way, when you do become sweethearts, it will *be* love and not just seem like love.

Fourth, develop the power of self-restraint. Be like Joseph, not like David. When Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph, he "fled, and got him out" (Genesis 39:12). He knew that it was wiser to avoid temptation than to resist it. King David, by contrast, somehow developed too much confidence in his own ability to handle temptation. He was tragically willing to flirt with evil, and it destroyed him. Even when you feel there is a growing foundation of love in your courtship, show your *real* respect for that love and the possibilities of your life together. Exercise self-restraint as Alma advised Shiblon in this paradox: "Bridle . . . your passions [so] that ye may be filled with love" (Alma 38:12). It is not that cheap thrills are too satisfying but that they are not satisfying enough. Temptation is an illusion—a trick to make you give up the blessing of real love in exchange for fake love.

Fifth, as you search to fulfill your God-given romantic longings, live for the presence of the Holy Spirit as your constant guide. He will help you not only to separate the real from the counterfeit but also to have the strength to live reality in complete worthiness. Don't date someone you already know you would not, or should not, ever want to marry. If you should fall in love with someone you shouldn't marry, you can't expect the Lord to guide you away from that person after you are already emotionally committed. It is difficult enough to tune your spiritual receiver to the whisperings of heaven without jamming up the channel with the loud thunder of romantic emotion.

The key to spiritual guidance is found in two words: *genuine worthiness*. A comparison of two scriptures makes this point vividly: Those who look upon others with lustful hearts will (1) not have the Spirit, (2) shall deny the faith, and (3) shall experience fear (see D&C 63:16).

In direct contrast, point-by-point, those who garnish their thoughts with virtue will (1) have the Holy Ghost as a constant companion, will (2) feel confident in the Lord's presence, and will (3) have the doctrine of the priesthood distilled upon their souls as the dews from heaven (see D&C 121:45–46). Our thoughts, controlled and bridled into virtuous paths, will lead to real love.

Sixth, avoid the habit of feeling sorry for yourself, which includes worrying about seeming socially unsuccessful. Everybody in the world doesn't need to marry you—it only takes one. Again, be your best, real self. If someone isn't smart enough to see and appreciate your real self, then you don't want to marry that person anyway. Seek opportunities for developing friendships, as distinguished from going on dates. We discovered in our own courtship the natural growth and happiness of being friends first and sweethearts second—that sequence is worth waiting for.

Don't worry that you are not well known; seek to be worth knowing. The discouragement you may feel about your social life is often a form of the insecurity we all feel in trying to find our real selves. Without the apparent approval of your self-worth that comes through social success, you may experience feelings of self-doubt. That is not unusual—most of us wonder at times if other people love us, or even if the Lord loves us.

Some mistakenly seek the seeming symbols of success—being popular, rich, or famous to prove their worth. Sometimes you may let someone take improper liberties with you or you may indulge yourself in some practice that seems to bring temporary relief, but it only makes you feel worse in the long run. Some even make poor marriage choices just to show the world that *somebody* will have them—again, an illusion.

Ultimately, however, only the Lord's approval of our lives really matters. If you honestly seek to be worth knowing and seek

earnestly to do his will, the rest will take care of itself. Remember that, as Paul said, "All things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28).

Seventh, let yourself belong to the natural, real order of God's laws. A critically important step on the path to maturity occurs when you realize (notice the root *real* in that word) that we keep the commandments not because parents and leaders insist, but because the natural, real consequence of our obedience is our own genuine happiness—no pretending, no vain wishing. The gospel itself is simply the truth about things as they really are. Therefore, to live the gospel is to live in harmony with the natural laws of life, for there is a natural ecology in the spiritual world as well as in the physical world.

This principle is true because the universe is designed to produce deep human happiness. Living contrary to nature, contrary to things as they really are, will make us miserable, whereas living harmoniously with nature is the pathway to everlasting happiness. Hence Alma's advice that "wickedness never was happiness." The wicked "have gone contrary to the nature of God; therefore, they are in a state contrary to the nature of happiness" (Alma 41:10–11).

Eighth, be the person you know you are. One student—we'll call her Amy—found this to be hard. She wrote:

I really loved this guy, and I saw no problem with our relationship. There were problems though. . . . I rationalized [pretended] by saying, "I'm not going to marry him. It's okay. And besides, I'll be a good influence."

I finally could not stand living a lie. I was not being true to myself. [And notice:] I was not acting like the person that I knew I was inside. I needed to make a change in my life.

Amy was letting the illusion of love overpower who she really was. When she saw that

illusion shattered, she realized as she said, “Remaining true to yourself and your beliefs is the best joy you can find.”

President Spencer W. Kimball once said that “marriage can be more an exultant ecstasy than the human mind can conceive” (*TSWK*, pp. 305–6). And when we have paid the price of patient preparation, self-discipline, and an irrevocable commitment to another person’s happiness, we can taste the sweet joy of authentic romantic love.

Ninth, obtain your patriarchal blessing.

Many of you already have. Let me tell you what a patriarchal blessing meant to our friend Dean in seeing and living the reality that really matters.

When Dean was sixteen or seventeen, he fell for a girl named Consuela. As he described it:

The ultimate for me was this: I would turn up my collar, put on my sunglasses, and pick up Consuela. Then we would go to the drive-in. [I always wanted to ask him, Wearing sunglasses to a drive-in? After dark?] I couldn’t seem to think about anything else except looking cool and going out with Consuela.

Then Dean responded to an invitation to get his patriarchal blessing.

When I got that blessing, it was as if someone punched a hole through the veil and I could see who I really was, where I really wanted to go, what was really important. I decided I really did want to go on a mission. I wanted to live so I could be married in the temple. That blessing literally changed how I looked at everything.

Before the blessing Dean saw the world through sunglasses—darkly. After the blessing he literally saw the light. In a sense he had come out from the “ugly mists of vapors” (though I think Consuela was hardly ugly) into the brightness of the sun, feeling that God was

there and that God knew he was there. Knowing what he knew helped him to act, to begin the process of becoming what he could really become.

How can you build an authentic, real testimony of Christ and his gospel? As Dean discovered, to base a testimony on reality is the surest way to grow spiritually. It is the most crucial way to be rather than to seem. Maybe the simplest way to put it is step-by-step—no seeming, no pretending—one surely planted step followed by another.

A returned missionary wrote recently:

Once I reached my mission, I was so caught up in trying to understand what missionaries did I hardly had time to dwell on my questions too much. But I was quite conscious, still, of not wanting to say I “knew” more than I felt I really knew. As time went on I had a number of experiences in which I saw the Spirit of the Lord actively working in the lives of a few investigators, members, and missionaries. After several months I found myself feeling more comfortable in acknowledging the reality of the Lord’s influence in my experience. I began learning that a testimony is a gradual, growing thing rather than a sudden yes-or-no kind of event. As time passed I could testify with more confidence that the gospel changes lives. Through all of this I never changed my conviction about being honest with myself. Then I discovered that because of that honesty, the affirming experiences I did have meant even more to me because I knew they were real.

I could literally trace my development through the verses in Alma 32, which became a source of great comfort and understanding for me. As Alma put it [verses 34–35]: “For ye know that the word hath swelled your souls, and ye also know that it hath sprouted up, that your understanding doth begin to be enlightened, and your mind doth begin to expand. O then, is not this real? I say unto you, Yea.”

This has been how my testimony has developed—one real step at a time. My testimony is

based on real experiences. For me it has not been quickly gotten, nor based on a one-time clincher kind of experience—just piece by piece. But each piece is a true story, even if it may also have a little true preaching in it. Each piece is part of ultimate reality—an eternal circle. I feel I have learned, like Hamlet, that “I have that within which passeth show” (act 1, scene 2, line 84). Let me give you a few fragmentary word pictures:

About our marriage: It was worth waiting for. It gets better all the time—kneeling together in prayer, talking, comforting, sharing, buoying up, working, grieving, tender caring, together, until the marriage becomes the eternal circle of love that our rings symbolize.

About the gospel: Hungering to study the scriptures in order to teach. In a line once for hours to buy tickets, being struck that what I was saying to a young couple from South Africa about the gospel was true. Telling my Shakespeare class that their souls can “delight in fatness” (2 Nephi 9:51), not just from learning about corpulent Falstaff, but more fully from “feasting upon the word of Christ” (2 Nephi 31:20). Also, knowing that to know the scriptures is not enough—they must be lived. Knowing that the Lord desires that we find fulfillment. It is Satan, not God, who seeks to numb our sensibilities, to make reality seem an illusion until we are eternally miserable. And, realizing that the newborn with the white downy fluff for hair has suddenly become a college freshman, now a missionary, and he’s really ready to serve. Finding that the joy is there, even in the midst of pain.

About our family: A circle of family memories—how did the Relief Society in the BYU Thirty-Eighth Ward thirty years ago know that at the birth of our first child when they gave us a Wordsworth “Trailing Clouds of Glory” quilt with the seven stars that we would have seven children? More circles of priesthood holders at blessings, ordinations, settings apart. Wedding rings—circles of friends and families around holy altars for sealings. The birth of our first grandchild—our daughter-in-law Joy sitting up gingerly in her hospital bed, holding out to me flame-haired Sarah Anne, saying, “Here she is! Want to hold her, Grandma?” And our grandson, Devin, who lived but three weeks—a circle of family and friends around his little coffin in the Lehi cemetery, feeling all the way to the core of our beings things as they really are, that Devin lives. He lives because Christ lives and gives us day-to-day his atonement. Christ’s life is “an endless light”—a beacon to beckon us to know, to do, to be—to be real, to become eternal.

In the words of Henry Vaughan:

*I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great ring of pure and endless light.
All calm, as it was bright.
[Silex Scintillans (1655), “The World”]*

It is better to be than to seem. It is time to “get real,” in the ultimate sense of eternal reality. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.