

Be Renewed in the Spirit of your Mind

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If some of you left emotional mothers back home, joyfully hysterical at seeing you leave for school, please know that there is someone here who welcomes you in exactly the same way. I delight in the assignment of being your mother-away-from-home. (That's the joyful part.) And of course I want each of you to come by and tell me when you will be in each night. (That is the hysterical part!) Please know that we love you and that we are happy you are back.

Because of the very special family feeling we have here at BYU, this campus can be your *alma matter*, literally your "fostering mother." There is an army of people here anxious to nurture you in faith and knowledge, to help you understand that Christ-centered learning will give you an inner core of confidence and the strength to succeed in life's tasks.

Be Your Own Best Friend

I know something of the anxieties with which you start the school year, so as you begin this fall, my deepest, most earnest wish for you is that you will approach this year with peace and self-assurance—that you will be more caring for yourself and as kind to yourself as you would be to a friend in need. *You*

are in need, and you ought to be your own best friend.

Military historians tell us that an army can seldom fight a successful war on two fronts. Napoleon learned that lesson too late, and we should make certain that we learn it in a less painful way than he did. We will always have some external battles to fight on an exterior front—those battles of life that the Lord in his wisdom allows us to face so we can grow and be purified and become skillful problem solvers. These "outside" problems might include a poor grade in a difficult class or some dating frustrations or perhaps the very real financial challenges you face. My prayer for you is that such troubles on the external front can be faced and finally conquered.

However, the battle that many of you wage on an interior front concerns me more than these external ones I have just mentioned. Many of us create a civil war within ourselves by internalizing problems of fear, uncertainty, self-doubt, and worry—often over things we can do precious little about. If we spend our

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time and energy worrying about being too tall or too short or about our freckles and warts and big noses, then I fear we are doomed to certain defeat. The person who is engaged in such a constant internal fight has little energy and power left to win the outside battles. To be successful in the many skirmishes of life, you cannot afford to be your own worst enemy. And taking the battles inside—firing mortal shells into your very soul—is potentially one of the most damaging of all human activities. Believe it or not, you can recover from poor grades or a missed date or a flat tire and dead battery on the car. But if you turn such outside matters into self-recrimination and self-criticism, letting them damage your spirit and your sense of self-worth and esteem, then you have begun a battle with a very high mortality rate indeed.

Exercising Right Thinking

When I was your age (and sometimes even now), there was often a struggle over how I saw myself. I was very “skilled” in the art of pummeling myself. I had a terrible habit of bringing problems inside when, in fact, they should have been handled in practical, external ways. I seemed to have a real knack for fighting life’s battles on two or three or four fronts at once—and I took a lot of needless shrapnel as a result. So as an old casualty myself, I plead with you to make a distinction between your problems and yourselves—there is a crucial difference. Problems can be painful and dark and disappointing—but *we* are not painful and dark and disappointing. We are children of God and must see ourselves as God sees us, recognizing the positive in ourselves, the part God loves so much, even as we work on what we may *think* are our freckles and warts and blemishes and big noses. You *can* change how you see yourself. You *can!* That is why a new year is so exhilarating. We have the opportunity to see things better than before. We can, as Shakespeare said, “Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, Raze out the written troubles of

the brain” (William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, act 5, sc. 3, lines 40–41).

Dorothy Hulst has written,

As the physically weak woman can make herself strong by careful and patient training, so the woman of weak thoughts can make them strong by exercising herself in right thinking.

To put away [weak and negative thoughts] and to begin to think with purpose, is to enter the ranks of those strong ones who only recognize failure as one of the pathways to attainment; and make all conditions serve them, and who think strongly, attempt fearlessly, and accomplish masterfully. [Dorothy Hulst, *As a Woman Thinketh*, a transcription for women of James Allen’s essay *As a Man Thinketh* (Marina Del Rey, California: DeVorss and Company), p. 41]

I am pleading with you not to wait until you get to my age before you understand this. It is possible to live with all your power in the present. You can replace old doubts with new hopes. So clean out that closet in your mind and haul a load of needless negative baggage off to D.I.

You can begin by practicing just three simple exercises in right thinking: (1) Remember that any failure is only temporary in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The decision to carry on in spite of disappointment turns the worst circumstance into success. (2) There can be no self-pity—and that means *no* self-pity. Nothing dissipates our strength faster or more quickly drives away those who would truly wish to help us than self-pity. (3) Eliminate all “would haves,” “could haves,” “should haves,” and “if onlys.” What has happened is past and finished. Leave it there. Profound power will come in living and making things right in the present.

Be Patient in Your Pursuit

I have not only lived long enough now to believe that God gives us weaknesses so they may become strengths, but I have also lived

long enough to see that promise from the book of Ether fulfilled (see Ether 12:37). I have lived long enough to see some of my earlier limitations become my greatest blessings. I have also seen growth in areas in which I didn't particularly *want* any strength—but growth which a loving Father in Heaven knew I surely must have needed.

To recognize areas of vulnerability and needed growth in our life is to recognize a chance for divine influence. I have loved this thought: If you are willing to serenely bear the trial of personal disappointment and weakness, then you will be for Jesus a pleasant place of shelter. (Quoted by M. Scott Peck, M.D., in *Further Along the Road Less Traveled* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988], cassette recording)

I think the Lord is looking for people who are truly contrite. Humility is very becoming to any of us, and humility comes from an honest and balanced recognition of both our limitations and our strengths. But I also think that the Lord will not be particularly comfortable dwelling with a person who (to the exclusion of all other joys and blessings in life) ponders continually his or her problems, who is obsessed and finally immobilized by them, who hasn't learned to bear those limitations serenely. That isn't humility, it is near-blaspemy. When you dwell on your limitations excessively, to the point that they affect your inner view and strength, you mock God in his very creation. You deny the divinity within you. You resist the gift of Christ on the cross. So be patient in your pursuit of perfection.

Conversation with Ourselves

May I close with one very practical approach to a new beginning. Brother James T. Duke of our faculty recently wrote a provocative and inspiring article for the *Ensign*. In it he said,

I often discussed with my sociology students the work of George Herbert Mead, a great analyst of human behavior. George Mead was especially

*interested in the human mind and in the way it operates According to Mead, thinking is essentially a conversation we hold with ourselves. "We can hear ourselves talking, and the import of what we say is the same to ourselves [as] it is to others." (Mind, Self, and Society, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934, p.62.[James T. Duke, "Drawn Out in Prayer Continually," *Ensign*, February 1987, p. 25]*

That is a profound idea! We all talk to ourselves, don't we? Then why don't we improve the quality of the conversation? I am constantly saying, "I wonder if my alarm will go off? Will Duffy get the teachers he wants this year in school? Yes, I know I should start exercising. I do hope the Lord will forgive me for eating mocha-flavored ice cream."

If that kind of thinking is simply a conversation with ourselves—and it is—why not turn it just a bit more into a conversation with God? To do so, in essence, is to fulfill the scriptural injunction to pray continually. As Brother Duke says, "My thoughts become more meaningful and more holy when I direct them toward [my] Father [in Heaven]" (Duke, "Drawn Out in Prayer," p. 25).

When I follow that practice, my self-talk becomes more lofty, more encouraging, and it loses the ingredients of fear and doubt. I find myself shifting my thinking this way:

"Father in Heaven, please let me awaken on time to a full, pleasant day. Bless Duffy, as well as Matt and Mary, that they will have a superb academic experience this year. Grant me the discipline to improve my health with a good physical fitness program. And please forgive my mocha-flavored ice cream, unless of course thou canst see fit to approve of it."

Paul wrote to Ephesians, "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind. . . . Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers" (Ephesians 4:23, 29). Edify and minister grace unto your

hearers—especially when every waking hour of the day that hearer is you.

The result of that kind of personal conversation can bring, for virtually all of us, near-perfect inner peace and a much more positive view of those outward battles we face. Best of all, we will no longer fight on two fronts; we will focus our strength on the kinds of battles God very much prefers that we fight.

As Paul said in another setting, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Welcome to a new year and what can be literally a new life in Christ, where all things become new and old things pass away. I bear my testimony of this and leave my love, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.