

Language: A Miraculous Gift

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I am honored that I have been asked to speak at today's devotional assembly. During the six years that I was dean, I enjoyed sitting in one of these comfortable chairs located behind me, as I listened to Church leaders and colleagues deliver messages of inspiration. I found this morning that the chair assigned to me was not nearly as comfortable—at least I didn't feel quite as relaxed. I pray that the Lord's Spirit will be with me this morning, that I may enjoy his guidance as we share this time together.

One of the qualities of humankind that distinguishes us from other species, and that relates us closely with our Father in Heaven, is the ability to communicate using language. Speaking and listening and reading and writing are such natural parts of everyday life for most of us that we rarely stop to consider the fact that we are performing a miracle. In the opinion of the late Danish linguist Otto Jespersen, "In his whole life man achieves nothing so great and so wonderful as what he achieved when he learned to talk" (in Richard Lederer, *The Miracle of Language* [New York: Pocket Books, 1991], p. 224). Language is one of the most important of our human possessions. Noah Webster, a man whose very name is intimately associated with the English language,

said that "language, as well as the faculty of speech, was the immediate gift of God" (in Lederer, *The Miracle*, p. 241). Language is indeed a gift of God to help us as we experience this earthly life.

Consider with me for a few minutes what takes place as two people engage in a simple conversation. The speaker must first formulate thoughts about what is to be said; then recall the appropriate words that express these thoughts; then order the words in a grammatically correct sequence; then perform unbelievable "acrobatic maneuvers" with the lungs, mouth, tongue, lips, teeth, velum, larynx, pharynx, and other speech organs that most of us don't even know we have (see Philip Lieberman, *Eve Spoke* [W. W. Norton, 1998], p. xv). We must control nasality, volume, pitch, stress, intonation, and speed. We perform this complex task in one or two seconds for an average sentence. As if this were not enough, we are constantly thinking ahead to the next sentence and the one after that. The listener meanwhile must perform this same operation

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in reverse, trying to make sense out of what is really nothing more than a continuous stream of noise.

V-e-r-y f-e-w p-e-o-p-l-e s-p-e-a-k i-n s-u-c-h a w-a-y t-h-a-t t-h-e-y c-a-r-e-f-u-l-l-y e-n-u-n-c-i-a-t-e e-v-e-r-y w-o-r-d. Instead, we run words and sounds together, even leaving out sounds entirely or blending them together in creations such as *gunna* for “going to,” *wanna* for “want to,” *whuf* for “what if,” and *oush* for “I wish.” The listener must take all of this into account as this few seconds of speech is decoded first into words, then into some kind of meaning. In a typical conversation the listener is also a speaker and must prepare a spoken response while trying to listen at the same time. To complicate the process of listening even more, there are often extraneous sounds such as other people speaking around us, traffic noise, machines operating, airplanes flying overhead, or bells ringing. When we analyze language we discover that the system of rules for encoding and decoding sentences is highly complex. Yet when we speak and listen we are hardly conscious of rules. We just speak spontaneously and don’t worry about verb conjugation, pronoun antecedents, noun plurals, or word order. And we get it right most of the time.

I feel that it can safely be said that using language is indeed miraculous. I truly believe that if language did not exist and someone proposed it, it would be dismissed as an impossibility. The marvelous thing is that, except for cases of speech impairments, everyone beyond a certain age can and does use language almost continuously during the waking hours of a day, and sometimes even while sleeping. If we are not speaking, then we are listening to other people speak—or sing—either live or through radio and television. If we are not speaking or listening, we are reading books, newspapers, magazines, signs, posters, license plates, and any number of printed media. And many of us spend a great deal of time writing during an average day, especially those of us addicted to

e-mail. Much of our enjoyment, inspiration, education, and general knowledge in life comes through language in the form of reading, listening to speakers, entertainment, personal communication, and social interaction.

Language has been the object of interest and study among humans probably for as long as languages have existed—certainly as far back as we have written records. Linguists and anthropologists are continually trying to show relatedness among existing and extinct languages and would like very much to discover the original language. Unfortunately, we have no information about the early history of human speech except for a couple of scriptures such as Genesis 11:1, which refers to the time just prior to the building of the Tower of Babel: “And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.” In verse 8 we read that the Lord was not pleased about the building of the tower, so he confounded the language of the people and “scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth.” In Moses 6:6 we learn that the language of this time was “pure and undefiled.”

Today there are approximately four to six thousand languages spoken among the people of the world. This number is not very precise because there is often disagreement as to what is a language and what is a dialect. And this does not even include the hundreds—perhaps thousands—of languages that were once spoken but are now extinct. In the Americas alone, for example, there were probably several hundred languages spoken by the native inhabitants that are no longer spoken today. In spite of the tremendous diversity among the thousands of languages spoken today and in the past, we find that in many ways these languages actually have a great deal in common. Each of them is a complex and well-organized system that is capable of expressing quite well the thoughts and feelings of its speakers. Languages change constantly over time, but there is no such thing as a degenerate or

inferior language. Benjamin Lee Whorf, one of the pioneer linguists of our century, said:

*The crudest savage may unconsciously manipulate with effortless ease a linguistic system so intricate, manifoldly systematized, and intellectually difficult, that it requires the lifetime study of our greatest scholars to describe its workings. [In Lederer, *The Miracle*, p. 242]*

Given the divine and miraculous nature of human language, it seems to me that it is incumbent upon us, the beneficiaries of this gift, to use language in a way that reflects its venerable status and sacred origin. The Roman writer Publius said, “Speech is a mirror of the soul: as a man speaks, so is he” (Publius Syrus, Maxim 1073). And Richard Lederer, an educator and popular author on language, writes:

*Thus it is that the manner in which you utter words, write words, and receive words throughout your life determines how effectively and resourcefully you carry on the business of being a member of the human race. [Lederer, *The Miracle*, p. 18]*

Like many things that our Father in Heaven has blessed us with, language can be used as a force to bring about much righteousness, to bring us blessings, and to bless the lives of those around us. But it can also be used as a tool of destruction. It can edify and uplift as well as vilify and destroy. In Matthew 15 you will recall that the scribes and Pharisees rebuked the Savior because his disciples failed to wash their hands before eating bread. The Savior responded by saying:

Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man. . . .

But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man. [Matthew 15:11, 18]

In the Third Epistle of James we are warned about the danger of an uncontrolled tongue:

And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature. . . .

Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. [James 3:6, 10]

I would like to discuss five danger zones of language use—or misuse—that I believe violate the very purpose for which language was intended. As we give utterance to our thoughts and feelings, as we communicate with members of our family, our roommates, friends, fellow students, colleagues, store clerks, and impetuous drivers, as we perform this miracle of speech, we should be aware of the consequences of our actions.

The first language danger zone is that of negative speech. All of us are guilty on occasion of complaining about something, and we probably have a legitimate right to do so. But I am talking about the hard-core cases: the naysayers, the chronic complainers, the gripers, the groaners, the grouchers, the grouchers, the grumblers, the bellyachers, the murmurers, the faultfinders, and the whiners. These are the people who have very little good to say about anything. They have the uncanny ability to see a dark side in almost everything. They fail to realize that things in this life are not perfect, so they choose to dwell on imperfection. Life for them is not colorful—it’s not even black and white. It’s just dark. These are people who apparently find happiness in being unhappy and in letting everyone else know about it. They look for things to complain about because they find great pleasure in being indignant.

Perhaps we should have a tolerant attitude about other people’s outlook on life, but the

problem is that this kind of behavior can be infectious and even destructive. Imagine what it must have been like to have Laman and Lemuel around day and night to offer their opinions about what father Lehi had been instructed to do. It was a tough assignment that the Lord had given to Lehi and his family, but it was made even more difficult because of the constant murmuring of two adult men who should have known better. In an October 1989 general conference talk, Elder Neal A. Maxwell observed:

Damage to ourselves is sufficient reason to resist murmuring, but another obvious danger is its contagiousness. Even faithful father Lehi, for one brief moment, got caught up in the contagion of murmuring. (See 1 Ne. 16:20.) Similarly, when Moses lapsed, very briefly, it was under exasperating pressure from rebels. (See Num. 20:7–12.) No one knows how to work a crowd better than the adversary. ["Murmur Not," Ensign, November 1989, p. 84]

The second danger zone of language is that of speaking ill of others. This includes gossip, slander, spreading vicious rumors, and evil speaking of people around us. In section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord outlines some of the responsibilities of those who hold the office of teacher in the Aaronic Priesthood: "And see that there is no iniquity in the church, neither hardness with each other, neither lying, backbiting, nor evil speaking" (D&C 20:54). I know that it seems difficult to imagine a 14-year-old boy being expected to monitor backbiting and evil speaking within the confines of his ward boundaries, but I do believe that the Lord was speaking to all of us, not just to the teachers. It is sometimes hard not to relay a piece of juicy gossip about someone we know or make a snide remark about an acquaintance. But the weapon we use to launch slanderous remarks about other people will usually backfire and injure us as much as the intended vic-

tim. President David O. McKay admonished us in the closing remarks of a general conference talk:

May we go forth with greater resolution to defend one another in righteous living, to defend the Church, not to speak against our neighbors, nor against authorities of the Church, local, stake or general. Let us avoid evil speaking, let us avoid slander and gossip. These are poisons to the soul to those who indulge. Evil speaking injures the reviler more than the reviled. [CR, April 1953, p. 59]

And President N. Eldon Tanner spoke in a similar vein when he counseled:

Gossip is the worst form of judging. The tongue is the most dangerous, destructive, and deadly weapon available to man. A vicious tongue can ruin the reputation and even the future of the one attacked. Insidious attacks against one's reputation, loathsome innuendoes, half-lies about an individual are as deadly as those insect parasites that kill the heart and life of a mighty oak. They are so stealthy and cowardly that one cannot guard against them. [CR, April 1972, p. 57]

Shakespeare expressed the evil of slander through the character Iago in his play *Othello*:

*Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something,
nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to
thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed. [Othello III, iii,
157–61]*

The third danger zone is that of lying or dishonesty. In the book of Proverbs we read that among the seven things that the Lord hates is "a false witness that speaketh lies" (Proverbs 6:19). Furthermore, "lying lips are abomination to the Lord: but they that deal

truly are his delight" (Proverbs 12:22). And "the lip of truth shall be established for ever: but a lying tongue is but for a moment" (Proverbs 12:19). The Doctrine and Covenants admonishes us, "Thou shalt not lie; he that lieth and will not repent shall be cast out" (D&C 42:21). Unfortunately, playing fast and loose with the truth has become common, if not accepted, in our modern no-fault society, and we certainly have plenty of role models. Automatic denial is the typical knee-jerk reaction if someone has been caught or accused of doing something wrong.

The lie is often a strong temptation, because it may seem to help preserve a reputation or career or prevent serious legal problems. Frequently a lie is told subsequent to another sin that we are trying to cover up. Sometimes it works—at least for the present—but usually the truth emerges and a bad situation becomes even worse. As we meet with the bishop for a temple recommend interview, tithing settlement, or an ecclesiastical endorsement, as we submit academic work to our professors, as we interact daily with family members, roommates, classmates, friends, and strangers, we should keep in mind the sanctity of truth and the consequences of dishonesty. It can cause pain and suffering for other people, but the teller of the lie is the one who will suffer most.

In the second verse of the beloved hymn "Now Let Us Rejoice," we sing, "We'll love one another and never dissemble" (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 3). I don't know what motivated Brother William Phelps in 1833 to include this particular sentence in his hymn, but it is a good message for *our* times. Unfortunately, many of us today do not know the meaning of the word *dissemble*. It is not the opposite of *assemble*, and it has nothing to do with being disorganized. It means to conceal the truth or to deceive. We encounter dissembling all the time in today's world. Have you ever been told that you have definitely won a million dollars? Have you ever received a notice that you have been

selected out of all the people in your city to receive a special prize? Have you ever read or heard about something that just seemed too good to be true? It is a natural tendency for some people to want to push the limits of honesty to the edge. I recall as a campus bishop being told by a member of my ward, "Well, technically, bishop, I really wasn't lying to you." What does that mean? Are you honest in your dealings with other people? That is a simple question. The answer should be equally simple.

Language danger zone number four is the use of profanity and its close relatives obscenity, swearing, cursing, cussing, blasphemy, vulgarity, and sacrilegious speech. I have never really understood why certain movies, television programs, musical recordings, books, and magazines are said to contain "adult" or "mature" language. Is this use of offensive language really a sign of maturity? I think not. Perhaps "immature" language would be a more appropriate designation. You will recall the account related by Parley P. Pratt about an incident in the makeshift jail at Richmond, Missouri, in November of 1838. The guards, according to Brother Pratt, were

the most noisy, foul-mouthed, vulgar, disgraceful rabble that ever defiled the earth. . . .

In one of those tedious nights we had lain as if in sleep till the hour of midnight had passed, and our ears and hearts had been pained, while we had listened for hours to the obscene jests, the horrid oaths, the dreadful blasphemies and filthy language of our guards. . . .

I had listened till I became so disgusted, shocked, horrified, and so filled with the spirit of indignant justice that I could scarcely refrain from rising upon my feet and rebuking the guards; but had said nothing to Joseph, or any one else, although I lay next to him and knew he was awake. On a sudden he arose to his feet, and spoke in a voice of thunder, or as the roaring lion, uttering, as near as I can recollect, the following words:

“SILENCE, ye fiends of the infernal pit. In the name of Jesus Christ I rebuke you, and command you to be still; I will not live another minute and hear such language. Cease such talk, or you or I die THIS INSTANT!”

He ceased to speak. He stood erect in terrible majesty. Chained, and without a weapon; calm, unruffled and dignified as an angel, he looked upon the quailing guards, whose weapons were lowered or dropped to the ground; whose knees smote together, and who, shrinking into a corner, or crouching at his feet, begged his pardon, and remained quiet till a change of guards. [Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1950), pp. 210–11; emphasis and capitalization in original]

Hugh B. Brown tells us:

The man or woman who is guilty of profanity, swearing, or crude slang unwittingly reveals a soiled mind and a limited vocabulary, and is pitied and shunned by all cultured people. Profaning the name of God is an affront to him, and he has forbidden it. [Hugh B. Brown, *The Abundant Life* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), p. 65]

And Spencer W. Kimball has said:

Profanity displays poverty of language. We note the increasing coarseness of language and understand how Lot must have felt when he was, according to Peter, “vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked.” (2 Peter 2:7.) We wonder why those of coarse and profane conversation, even if they refuse obedience to God’s will, are so stunted mentally that they let their capacity to communicate grow more and more narrow. Language is like music; we rejoice in beauty, range, and quality in both, and we are demeaned by the repetition of a few sour notes. [TSWK, p. 199]

The fifth danger zone or misuse of language, and perhaps the most pernicious of all, is that of verbal abuse. This can range from

serious teasing to unjust criticism to mean-spirited and even hateful accusations. Ironically, verbal abuse usually occurs among people who are supposed to love each other: parents and children, husbands and wives, and close friends. We know that the broken bones from sticks and stones can heal much faster and more permanently than the broken spirits from words that can and do hurt a great deal. “The stroke of the tongue breaketh the bones. Many have fallen by the edge of the sword: but not so many as have fallen by the tongue” (Apocrypha, Ecclesiasticus 28:17–18). Name-calling, belittling, criticizing, sarcasm, and other similar tactics can cause mental scars that are difficult to erase. Sometimes people who feel that they are in a position of authority or responsibility believe it is their duty to correct a child, a spouse, a friend, or a student. This may be true, but the response should not be Draconian. The outcome is rarely productive and usually results in a loss of self-esteem. Sometimes it becomes necessary to say painful things to other people—for example, when conveying unpleasant realities or tragic news. But far too often painful things are said that are completely unnecessary. The results can be devastating.

In an October 1991 conference talk, President Gordon B. Hinckley quoted:

Please remind the brethren that the physical and verbal abuse of women is INEXCUSABLE, NEVER ACCEPTABLE, AND A COWARDLY WAY OF DEALING WITH DIFFERENCES, especially and particularly despicable if the abuser is a priesthood holder. [“Our Solemn Responsibilities,” *Ensign*, November 1991, p. 50; capitalization in original]

President Ezra Taft Benson remarked in an earlier general conference talk:

What does it mean to love someone with all your heart? It means to love with all your emotional

feelings and with all your devotion. Surely when you love your wife with all your heart, you cannot demean her, criticize her, find fault with her, or abuse her by words, sullen behavior, or actions. ["To the Fathers in Israel," *Ensign*, November 1987, p. 50]

And on another occasion President Benson said, "A priesthood holder who would curse his wife, abuse her with words or actions, or do the same to one of his own children is guilty of grievous sin" ("What Manner of Men Ought We to Be?" *Ensign*, November 1983, p. 42).

Recent research has uncovered some disturbing facts about verbal abuse. For example, many people who are guilty of verbal abuse do not feel that they are being abusive. They think that their behavior is acceptable. Perhaps they grew up in an abusive environment and simply assumed this was normal. The second finding was that many victims of verbal abuse eventually begin to believe, at least in part, the horrible things that are being said about them. They feel that they deserve the treatment they are receiving. And finally, many abuse victims reported that the experience of verbal abuse was even worse than that of physical abuse (see Patricia Evans, *Verbal Abuse Survivors Speak Out* [Adams Media Corporation, 1993], pp. 27, 32–33, 122).

I think that we need to have a clear understanding of what is meant in the Doctrine and Covenants when we are told that we should reprove "betimes with sharpness" (D&C 121:43). This in no way gives license to vent our anger on someone who in our eyes has done something wrong. In the two preceding verses we read about long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned, kindness, pure knowledge, and being without hypocrisy and without guile. And we are told that we should only reprove "when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast

reproved, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy" (D&C 121:41–43).

Most of us wander into these five danger zones of language at various times during our lives. I confess that I do. We become so accomplished in speaking that we sometimes fail to think about what we are saying. Perhaps if we concentrate on the good we can accomplish through language, we will be less likely to misuse it. I like the counsel attributed to the late Mother Teresa: "Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless." If it is so easy to speak kind words, why don't we do it more often? I think it's fine to tell people to have a nice day, but I think it is even better to tell them other things that will make a contribution to that end. We don't have to be sugary and insincere, but I think that we can frequently find honest, simple, pleasant things to say to those around us. You will recall that the Savior said that the "things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart" (Matthew 15:18), just as the hymn reminds us, "Kind words are sweet tones of the heart" ("Let Us Oft Speak Kind Words," *Hymns*, 1985, no. 232). And from Proverbs: "Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones" (Proverbs 16:24).

I believe that the way we use language is closely related to how we keep the commandment to love one another. We can tell a spouse or a child that we love them, but we can show that love much more convincingly in the way we speak to them. The same goes for other people, for whom it may not be appropriate to say "I love you," but whom we are expected to love nonetheless. It seems to be the nature of some people to be cautious about how kindly they speak to other people—withholding compliments, congratulations, and expressions of gratitude, perhaps in the fear that they might somehow diminish themselves in the process. In fact, it is a measure of spiritual maturity to demonstrate love to other people through the language we use. We need to remember to

praise, encourage, compliment, and edify at suitable times as we speak to other people. We need to apologize and ask forgiveness when appropriate. We all know the positive effect that kind words can have on us. We should all do our part to keep the process in motion—even initiate it.

Just as we are what we say, we are also what we hear and read. A child learns language through hearing it spoken by others. As adults we never stop learning our native language, and much of what we learn depends on what we allow ourselves to be exposed to. As we admit language into our lives in the way of television, movies, books, magazines, musical lyrics, even the circle of friends we associate with, what effect is it having on us? Do we sometimes have an uncomfortable feeling that the type of language we are hearing or reading is replete with vocabulary that we personally would not want to use ourselves? If we are exposed to inappropriate language on a regular basis, we soon become more comfortable with it and it begins to creep into our own vocabulary. We need to exercise good judgment in selecting the type of media that we are exposed to. Let me make a few suggestions.

A good first choice is obviously the scriptures. I must confess that I have struggled with maintaining a regular scripture-reading schedule, but when I succeed it is always a source of personal satisfaction. Much of the reward I find in reading the scriptures is the spirit I feel.

A number of years ago I was a young assistant professor living in Ithaca, New York. I had been asked to be on a committee for the Modern Language Association that was scheduled to meet soon at Pennsylvania State University. The association was going to pay all of the expenses, and I thought I was pretty hot stuff. But the first part of the trip was a disaster. The small commuter plane I took almost hit a herd of deer when it was landing. My luggage was lost. I had to wait an unusually long time for the shuttle to the hotel. A sudden

storm caused a power outage in the city, and the hotel had no electricity. Even though my expenses were to be paid, I learned while checking in that I was expected to pay for the hotel and my meals in advance, then be reimbursed later. I had brought very little money.

After checking in I went to my dark room and sat on the bed, feeling sorry for myself. The storm had cleared and the rays of the setting sun came through my window and provided sufficient light for me to see a Gideon Bible lying on a nightstand next to the bed. I opened it up and immediately saw the verse in Matthew 11:28: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” I immediately felt much better, but I also felt ashamed, because I knew that the Savior probably had more serious cases in mind than lost luggage and a power outage. But the message was appreciated. The scriptures can teach and enlighten us, and we should make them a part of our daily lives. We should feast on the words of the Lord frequently.

In a devotional talk two weeks ago, President Thomas S. Monson encouraged us to learn the words to our Church hymns and think about them as we sing (BYU devotional, 10 March 1998). It is possible to sing all of the verses of a hymn and be stirred by the beautiful music but hardly think about the message. The texts of our hymns are poetry—some of the most beautiful and uplifting that we can experience. Elder Boyd K. Packer reminds us that our LDS hymns “teach of the ministry of our Lord, our Redeemer. We sing reverently of His Crucifixion, His sacrifice for our sins, His Resurrection, His Atonement, His Ascension” (“The Peaceable Followers of Christ,” *Ensign*, April 1998, p. 62).

While I was serving a mission in Germany, I was assigned for a few months with another elder to travel around the mission. On one Sunday evening in April we were driving from Nürnberg to a small town to the north. We had attended a district conference that afternoon,

and we were both in good spirits. But we were also tired, and it was getting dark. I was driving and decided to turn on the car radio to help me stay alert. Immediately the car was filled with the sound of the Tabernacle Choir singing “O My Father.” I was stunned. The station happened to be that of the U.S. Armed Forces Radio Network, and the program was called “Hymns from Home.” They had no idea how accurate that was. The music of this hymn is beautiful, but on that night it was the poetry of Eliza R. Snow that captured my spirit: “For a wise and glorious purpose / Thou hast placed me here on earth” (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 292). It was a stirring spiritual experience.

In a few days we will have the privilege of listening to our Church leaders at general conference. I encourage you to avail yourselves of this extraordinary opportunity. I recall the feeling I had after the Sunday afternoon session of the October 1997 general conference. I was ablaze with enthusiasm—a word whose literal meaning is “inspired by God.” As I thought about it, I realized that I had heard very little that I had not already heard before. But I appreciated the reminders, the examples, the encouragement, the admonitions, the expressions of love, and the fervent testimonies of the speakers. It was good for me to reflect on their words and think about my life. Through the *Ensign*, the *New Era*, and other Church publications, we also have the opportunity to read about the gospel and its promise.

There are, of course, countless other sources of good language that can enrich our lives: the great literature of the ages, books that help us better understand our world and the universe, books on the creative accomplishments of humanity, histories, and biographies of great people. Unfortunately, there is so much genuinely good reading material that none of us can begin to devour even a small part of it in a lifetime. Why then do so many people choose to spend their valuable time reading books and magazines that detract from the Spirit instead

of nourishing it? Mark Twain wisely said, “The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can’t read them” (in Lederer, *The Miracle*, p. 131). It is similar for the kind of television programs and movies we choose to see. There are good offerings to select from, but there are too many that contain language that would probably cause Brother Parley P. Pratt to be “disgusted, shocked, horrified, and . . . filled with the spirit of indignant justice.”

I spoke earlier about the miracle of learning our mother tongue. How much more miraculous it is to learn a second and even third language. Many of you have done this, and I encourage you to maintain some level of proficiency in your newly acquired tongue. Read the scriptures, seek out occasions to converse with others, listen to recordings, and attend advanced classes to learn more about the literature, culture, and linguistic elements of the language. Those of you who have not learned another language may yet have this opportunity. You will never know when your ability to converse in a second language may be a source of blessings to other people.

Imagine the wonderful challenge the Church has faced during the past 10 or so years as the word of the gospel has been brought to the people of Eastern Europe, Africa, and other parts of the world. The scriptures, missionary materials, manuals, and much more must be translated into these languages. At the same time, new converts are coming into the Church who speak these languages, and missionaries are now learning to speak them. Think of the increasingly rich linguistic resources we are developing. Let me give you a vivid illustration. There are more than 750 languages spoken among the people of Africa. Some of these are tribal languages spoken by a relatively small number of people, but African language experts say that there are more than 80 so-called “critical” African languages. The Church is doing much of its missionary work in Africa

today using French and English, but there are many local missionaries who are teaching the gospel in the local languages. The Church is currently preparing translations of scriptures and other materials for 10 African languages, including Afrikaans, Akan, Amharic, Igbo, Malagasy, Shona, Swahili, Tswana, Xhosa, and Zulu. This is a wonderful beginning, but it is only a beginning.

In conclusion I would like once again to quote from Richard Lederer's book *The Miracle of Language*:

We give thanks for language—the human essence, the skin of thought, more to the mind than light is to the eye.

May we try not only to talk, but to say something; not only to hear, but to listen; not only to write, but to communicate.

May our thoughts and aspirations become words that serve to build bridges from mind to mind and from heart to heart, creating a fellowship of those who would hold fast to that which is good.
[Lederer, *The Miracle*, p. 243]

Watch your language! It is a tool far more powerful than you can possibly imagine. Think of the good you can accomplish by using it in the way that the Lord has intended. For this I pray in the name of him who was called the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. Amen.