

Led by the Spirit

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One of the first devotionals I attended at BYU was in 1979, when Elder Dallin H. Oaks was president of the university. He focused on the attitudes and commitments a student needed to succeed at BYU. President Oaks said:

At Brigham Young University you are privileged to take a guided tour with the best thinkers and through the best information available in the world today. Most of you will be eager and alert, stimulated by ideas, struggling with the exciting process of learning. Most BYU students are busy preparing themselves for the important responsibilities that they will bear. Do so. Do not be one of that smaller but painfully visible group of students who are still struggling up the far slopes of “fools’ hill,” chasing butterflies, giggling on the fringes, and pursuing the frivolous things of life while the sands of their study time at the University fall through the hourglass at their inexorable rate. These will finally leave—perhaps with a degree, hopefully with some kind of a job, but almost certainly without the education and learning that is the purpose of our mission here.¹

At times I was one of those students who chased butterflies. However, I did develop important skills as I attended my classes and

did the required assignments. Some of the classes that I took while here at BYU—and had not considered relevant to my professional life—had a direct impact on my success as a librarian.

For example, I was required to take a philosophy class as one of my general education requirements. I enjoyed the class but could not see any direct connection to my future plans. I remember a series of class sessions in which the professor carefully instructed us about the logic outlined in a Venn diagram. I understood the concept and found it interesting, but I tucked it away in my memory and did not think about it again until years later when I began teaching students how to do research using electronic databases. One of the skills students needed to learn was how to create a search statement for an online database using the concepts found in a Venn diagram. The *and*, *or*, and *not* used to limit or expand a search can be illustrated with what I was taught in philosophy. From that experience, and from

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others, I have learned that sometimes I will be directed to knowledge or experiences that do not fit my current life plan.

Elder Oaks gave a general conference talk in April 2001 called “Focus and Priorities” in which he emphasized the inspired use of information as the key to our growth in this life. He said:

Because of modern technology, the contents of huge libraries and other data resources are at the fingertips of many of us. . . .

Available information wisely used is far more valuable than multiplied information allowed to lie fallow. . . .

Overarching all of this is the importance of what the Spirit whispered to us last night or this morning about our own specific needs. Each of us should be careful that the current flood of information does not occupy our time so completely that we cannot focus on and hear and heed the still, small voice that is available to guide each of us with our own challenges today.²

Sometimes we do not recognize the importance of the learning opportunities we encounter. President Henry B. Eyring gave two examples of learning opportunities he missed because he did not realize their importance. President Eyring described growing up in a home with a father who was born in Mexico and spoke Spanish and who was a chemist and a great teacher. Those skills provided opportunities for President Eyring to learn from his father. However, he never asked his father to teach him Spanish, and he did not take advantage of times when his father wanted to show him how to solve a math problem related to his physics homework.

President Eyring said, “He pled with me to think more often about those things that then seemed so uninteresting and so unimportant.”³ Only later, when President Eyring was called to the Presiding Bishopric of the Church, did he realize that those missed opportunities

to learn from his father would have been a blessing to help him in his current Church assignments.⁴

He counseled:

Your life is carefully watched over, as was mine. The Lord knows both what He will need you to do and what you will need to know. He is kind and He is all-knowing. So you can with confidence expect that He has prepared opportunities for you to learn in preparation for the service you will give. You will not recognize those opportunities perfectly, as I did not. But when you put the spiritual things first in your life, you will be blessed to feel directed toward certain learning, and you will be motivated to work harder. You will recognize later that your power to serve was increased, and you will be grateful.⁵

Nephi told us that he “was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which [he] should do” (1 Nephi 4:6). When he said this, he was trying to fulfill the commandment he had received to retrieve the plates of brass from Laban and return with them to his family. After Nephi successfully delivered the plates to his father, Lehi rejoiced and thanked the Lord for them. He read them and found that they contained the commandments, genealogy, and stories his family needed to know in order to stay strong during their trials. Nephi wrote:

And we had obtained the records which the Lord had commanded us, and searched them and found that they were desirable; yea, even of great worth unto us, insomuch that we could preserve the commandments of the Lord unto our children. [1 Nephi 5:21]

Retrieving the records was not easy, and Nephi and his brothers failed twice. On the third attempt to retrieve the records, Nephi had no idea how he was going to get them, but he willingly followed where the Spirit led him, even when he was asked to do hard things to accomplish the commandment.

Can you see the pattern here? We have so much information around us, and it is our responsibility to seek the companionship of the Spirit so that we know what information is most important. Once we receive the guidance, we obey in faith, knowing that even if we cannot see its importance now, the Lord has a purpose for the direction we receive. Nephi promised, "I say unto you that if ye will enter in by the way, and receive the Holy Ghost, it will show unto you all things what ye should do" (2 Nephi 32:5). With this scripture in mind, I would like to contrast two stories of Latter-day Saint soldiers during World War II.

Karl was born in 1907. He lived with his parents and a brother in a small town near Berlin, Germany. As a teenager Karl became interested in languages and wanted to study English and French. At fifteen years old he went to work as an apprentice in a factory that made eyeglasses. When he was seventeen he met two Mormon missionaries. His interest in the English language led him to take the English classes offered by the missionaries. In exchange for them teaching him English, Karl had to listen to the missionaries preach the gospel.

Karl and his mother joined the Church on July 30, 1924. His father joined in August of that year, but his brother never joined the Church. In 1928 Karl received a mission call to the German-Austrian Mission. While serving in Basel, Switzerland, he met a young woman, Alma, and after his mission he returned to that area to work. They fell in love, but jobs were scarce, so Karl returned to his hometown to start a farm with his father. Alma followed, and in December 1930 they were married. In 1940 Karl was drafted into the German army, leaving behind his wife and young daughter.⁶

In contrast, Reynolds was born in the United States on July 3, 1922. He lived in Provo and Salt Lake City, Utah, and eventually graduated from East High School. His father died in 1935, when Reynolds was only thirteen. As the

only son and brother to two sisters, Reynolds felt great love and concern for his widowed mother and sisters. After high school Reynolds enlisted in the military and was sent to the Philippines. Prior to leaving Utah he received his patriarchal blessing. One of the promises in his blessing stated that he would "grow strong in the face of trial and temptation, growing strong in resisting temptation and thereby becoming an example of righteousness."

By November 1941 Reynolds was sailing toward the Philippines. In January 1942 Reynolds was writing home to his mother from Mindanao about the heavy fighting. His letters contain counsel to his family to be faithful and to pray for him. Every letter his mother received expressed his love and concern for his family, including his desire to be with them. He talked about his future, especially about what he wanted to eat when he got home and what he wanted to pursue as a profession.⁷

Both of these men faced life circumstances that were challenging and overwhelming, but both held strong to their faith and found comfort in the gospel.

Back in Europe Karl's faith and prayers helped him endure hardships during the war. His constant prayer was that he would not kill anyone or be killed but be permitted to return to his family. He described his ordeal as experiencing all the plagues. He told of having so many lice in his uniform that when he had the chance to be near a fire, he put his coat in it to kill the pests. One of his colleagues tried that same method, but it did not go as well for him. Instead of killing the lice, the heat acted as an incubator, and the lice multiplied to an unbearable level.

In May 1945 Karl learned that the war was over, but while he was trying to reach his home, he was captured by Russian soldiers. They sent him to a prison camp in Siberia. Lack of food, demanding work, illness, and harsh treatment by the guards took their toll on Karl's health. After eight weeks he was so

sick that his heart started to fail. He was sent to see the camp doctor, who used a dirty needle to give him a shot. Within a short time Karl had a serious infection.

During his captivity he pled with the Lord to keep him alive and strong enough to return to his family. Karl promised the Lord he would serve him for the rest of his life to the best of his ability.

In October 1945 a rumor went around the camp that most of the sick inmates in the prison camp would be sent back to their countries. In November the medical staff made a list of all the men who were to be sent home immediately. Karl's name was not on that list. He called on the Lord, asking for His help. He was desperate to go home because he knew he would not live much longer in the prison camp. He asked the doctor to look through the list again. It still was not there. The doctor started looking through the lists for other countries and finally found Karl's name on the Hungarian list. The doctor corrected the error, and Karl was put on a train for home.

The trip took two weeks. There were train cars full of prisoners returning to their homes. The prisoners were not given much food, so the strongest men would hunt for food when the train stopped. If the guards caught them, they were shot. Besides the limited food supply, it was cold. Every morning the guards would come to each train car and ask if there were any dead. Every morning there would be ten to twelve men who had died during the night.

Eventually Karl returned home, ill and emaciated. His wife and his mother nursed him back to health. Karl survived the war but faced additional struggles as a Church member in East Germany. Through guidance by the Spirit and protection from the Lord, he and his family escaped East Germany and eventually were led to Utah. Karl kept his promise to the Lord. He dedicated his life to the gospel and professionally spent many years working in various employment opportunities in the Church.

Meanwhile, Reynolds was listed as a prisoner of war by the Japanese government in May 1943. His mother received two messages through the Red Cross that indicated he was alive and healthy. The few words he was allowed to write told his mother that they were holding religious services in the prison camp and that he was working in the rice fields.

In a *Deseret News* article dated January 20, 1945, a reporter described how a Latter-day Saint group in a Japanese prison camp in the Philippines continued to live the gospel during their captivity. They held regular Church meetings and cared for each other. There were about twenty-five Mormon soldiers in the prison camp. They took comfort from their religion and had scriptures and songbooks. One former prisoner recounted a story of a sick young man being healed by two other prisoners. A Lieutenant Brown and an Officer Parry were the soldiers who administered to him. The Officer Parry mentioned in the article was Reynolds.⁸

In September 1944 Reynolds was put on a Japanese prison ship bound for Japan. However, just off of the west coast of Mindanao, in the Philippine Islands, the Japanese freighter carrying the prisoners was torpedoed and sunk. In February 1945 his mother was officially notified that Reynolds had been on board the ship. His body was never recovered, but eyewitness reports say that those on the ship did not survive.

When his mother received the news, she wrote the following poem:

My Service Flag

*My service flag, so brilliant,
With its silver, red, and blue,
Tells of the service of my son,
So young, so strong and true.*

*He went away all smiling
In his uniform so trim,
With never a sign of sorrow
But knowing war is grim.*

*He wrote such cheerful letters!
Wishing he could hear from home,
Telling of islands far away,
Of the ocean, blue, with its foam.*

*“O Father,” I prayed, “have mercy
On all boys of tender age,
Who answer the call of country
To write across history’s page.”*

*The story of war—its sorrows,
Its shocking atrocities, too.
How many died of starvation!
How many the enemy slew!*

*Today there came a letter.
The gist of its message is old.
As I looked up for solace, I saw
My blue star had turned to gold.⁹*

Both of these men were faithful to the gospel. They prayed in faith, and they desired righteous goals. One story ends with a miraculous survival and the other story ends with a young man who gave his life for his country.

Their lives and actions match the hymn “I’ll Go Where You Want Me to Go” when it says:

*But if, by a still, small voice he calls
To paths that I do not know,
I’ll answer, dear Lord, with my hand in thine:
I’ll go where you want me to go.¹⁰*

Karl is my grandfather and Reynolds is my great-uncle. Through a written history that my grandfather kept, along with stories of Reynolds from my grandmother, our family has been blessed by their examples of faith.

One of the concluding paragraphs in Reynolds’ patriarchal blessing sums up the power these men’s stories have had on my life. It says:

Be humble and prayerful before the Lord and He will never desert you, for the promise given to the

faithful shall be yours, that your yoke shall be made easy and your burden light. You shall have influence with the young, for they shall watch your course in life, thereby gaining courage and hope because of the things you have accomplished and will accomplish in the future.

Others have been led by the Spirit when it was not easy. For example, Moses was eighty years old when he was called to lead the children of Israel. Dr. Terry B. Ball, professor of ancient scripture here at BYU, gave a talk at the 2012 BYU Women’s Conference entitled “I Can Do Hard Things.” In this talk he described the fears and inadequacies Moses felt after his call. Dr. Ball then said:

Moses learned that our Heavenly Father is more concerned about our availability than our capabilities. As President Thomas S. Monson frequently reminds us, “Whom the Lord calls, the Lord qualifies.” If we will make ourselves available to do God’s work, he will make us capable.¹¹

Each of us will have experiences in which we will be prompted to follow a path that is challenging and that may not make sense at first. I have met students at this university and at others who have shared their testimonies with me of being in comfortable circumstances and having an unexpected prompting to go back to school to pursue a degree. They have sacrificed good jobs and comfortable homes and have uprooted their families to follow the guidance they received. They did not hesitate to obey the promptings they received, even when others questioned the wisdom of their decisions.

Last year I too was led on an unexpected path. During Christmas break, just before the winter 2013 semester began, a colleague and I were talking in the hallway about an interesting project someone was working on. I commented that when I retired I would love to work on a project like that. After a few

follow-up questions and some offhand remarks in answer to his questions, my colleague informed me that there was a possible project that matched my interests.

I did not recognize this as an inspired opportunity until a few months later when a leave had been approved and I was scheduled to go to Vienna, Austria, for six weeks to work on the project. I knew I was being led by the Spirit because I kept waiting for the feeling of terror that usually accompanies an idea that is not correct. However, I felt peace and the prompting to continue forward with the project.

That whispering of the Spirit led me to Vienna, where my work strengthened my testimony and helped me recognize the guiding hand of the Lord. I was invited to enter the home of a wonderful family: Johann and Ursula Wondra. Through their inspired service and leadership they have been instrumental in the growth of the Church in Central and Eastern Europe. They have kept personal and Church records since 1958. My role was to index the records they had so carefully preserved so that their records could be digitized.

There were many obstacles to this project, but the Lord placed people at the appropriate places and times to help me succeed. First, I lacked experience. I had never done a project like this before and did not have the professional skills needed to complete my part of the project. Through the expert teaching and mentorship of Matt Heiss at the Church History Library, I was able to learn enough to do the work.

The second challenge was that I did not speak German. I had a mother and grandparents who spoke German, and I had taken classes in high school and college, but I had forgotten everything. However, there were many kind people who spoke English when I needed help.

The final obstacle, and the one that turned my heart to complete trust in the Lord, was

that I was going alone to a country I did not know and would need to take care of my living arrangements such as housing, food, and transportation. In preparing for the trip I found an apartment on the Internet that turned out to be in a safe location and near grocery stores and public transportation. I can testify that when the Spirit prompts us and we are obedient, the Lord provides the blessings we need.

I spent six miraculous weeks working on this project with the Wondra family. They opened their records, their home, and their hearts to me. They taught me about faith and commitment to the gospel no matter what the struggles and challenges. Their example and instruction sustained me through my own struggles and my feelings of inadequacy.

Prior to leaving for Vienna I was prompted to extend my stay in Europe by one week and fly to Berlin, Germany, to help my mother with some family history work. She was seeking out Karl's grandparents. She had faithfully searched for many years with the hope of extending her family connections.

Before I left for Berlin I knew that I would be facing impossible odds in helping my mother find records of her ancestors. I again faced what I thought were insurmountable odds for success: I did not speak German, many of her ancestors came from small villages where records would not be easily accessible, and I had absolutely no idea where to go to find the records.

As I prayed and fasted, I told the Lord that He had chosen the weakest person possible to accomplish such a great task and that if anything came of it, it would be because of Him and not because of me.

After a few days of trying to figure out the public transportation system, I located a Family History Center in Berlin. A wonderful consultant in the center rescued me. She did not speak English, and my horrible German led us to some amusing charades as we tried to

create a shared understanding of my need. In the end, she and a colleague directed me to an archive of records that was available in Berlin.

By the time I was able to access the records in the Berlin archive, I only had two days before I had to leave the country to return home.

Again the Lord provided me with the knowledge and people I needed to accomplish the work. When I was lost, someone or something would guide me to the correct spot, and when I located the archive, I was blessed to have a librarian who spoke English and who was kind enough to allow me to enter the library without an appointment. His kindness and help were exactly what I needed at that time.

After locating the microfiche for the town in which my ancestors had lived, I had about six hours before the archive closed. As I scanned the records, I felt an indescribable joy the first time I recognized the family name. Still, it was not the exact record I needed. I left the archive that Monday discouraged because although I had found interesting information, I did not find the vital records we needed.

Getting into the archives for a second day seemed like an impossibility. I had already asked the librarian if I could make an appointment to come the next day, but he told me there were not any seats available. I prayed fervently, and even though there was technically no room for me in the archives, the librarian found an opening and let me into the archive to work on my last day in Berlin. That day I found the grandfather my mother had been searching for. I left with the knowledge that the Lord recognized my mother's hard work and faith in trying to serve her ancestors. I was humbled when I realized that the Lord had taken the weakest person He could find and made me strong enough to accomplish His work.

Just as I was successful in accomplishing a hard task through the guidance of the Spirit and people who were placed in my path to help me, I know that you too can succeed with the seemingly impossible tasks you are

given. If we are obedient to the promptings of the Spirit, we will be led to the knowledge we need to succeed and to accomplish hard things.

In the last general conference President Dieter F. Uchtdorf taught:

We acknowledge that your path will at times be difficult. But I give you this promise in the name of the Lord: rise up and follow in the footsteps of our Redeemer and Savior, and one day you will look back and be filled with eternal gratitude that you chose to trust the Atonement and its power to lift you up and give you strength.

. . . No matter how many times you have slipped or fallen, rise up! Your destiny is a glorious one! Stand tall and walk in the light of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ! You are stronger than you realize. You are more capable than you can imagine.¹²

Others may not understand the struggles you are going through or may try to discourage you from a path you are inspired to take, but I bear testimony that we are not left alone, and even when the path is challenging and difficult, the Lord will guide and bless us. Our faith and His love will help us succeed when the hard things we are asked to do seem impossible. I testify that Jesus is the Christ and that this is His Church. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Formula for Success at BYU," BYU devotional address, 11 September 1979.
2. Dallin H. Oaks, "Focus and Priorities," *Ensign*, May 2001, 82–83.
3. Henry B. Eyring, "Education for Real Life," *Ensign*, October 2002, 18.
4. See Eyring, "Education for Real Life," 18.
5. Eyring, "Education for Real Life," 18–19.
6. All information and stories about Karl came from an unpublished personal history written by Karl Grothe, "My Life Story," 27 October 1976.

7. All information about Reynolds came from letters, telegrams, his patriarchal blessing, and newspaper articles about Ernest Reynolds Parry in the personal papers of Etta Parry Julian.

8. See “L.D.S. Group in Jap Prison Camp Described,” Church section, *Deseret News*, 20 January 1945, 1, 11.

9. Georgia R. Parry, “My Service Flag,” undated and unpublished poem in the personal papers of Etta Parry Julian.

10. “I’ll Go Where You Want Me to Go,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 270.

11. Terry B. Ball, “I Can Do Hard Things: Lessons from the Old Testament,” in *Armed with Righteousness: Talks from the 2012 BYU Women’s Conference* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 143; quoting Thomas S. Monson, “You Make a Difference,” *Ensign*, May 1988, 43.

12. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “You Can Do It Now!” *Ensign*, November 2013, 57.