

Messages of Love

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Happy Valentine's Day! This is a day when we celebrate love. We think of love letters and hearts, roses and chocolate. Many hope today to *receive* a message from one they love, and some are planning to *deliver* a message to one they love. I hope you won't be disappointed.

My parents loved me dearly—of that I had no doubt. But when I was ten years old, I had to attend boarding school in England while my parents continued to live thousands of miles away in Saudi Arabia. The separation was an enormous wrench for me.

On the long flight to England, I remember feeling queasy in the pit of my stomach as I left behind the heat and sunshine of Arabia, flew across the miles, and descended through multiple layers of cloud into the cold, gray scene of London's Heathrow Airport. The rain droplets on the airplane window shot past, and I felt so very, very far from home.

I arrived at the school in my uniform of gray shorts, sweater, tie, and cap, pulling my great, green trunk of belongings behind me. The loneliness was overwhelming.

I slept in a dormitory with about fifteen other boys. It was a very foreign experience, complete with rickety, metal-framed beds and the occasional pillow fight. Every morn-

ing after making our beds, we boys would stand aside while our bed-making skills and "hospital corners" were graded. There were unfamiliar smells, unfamiliar foods, and *very* unfamiliar teachers. My Latin master would walk around the room and peck our heads with the tip of his ballpoint pen if we didn't know an answer. And I was very well pecked.

Out on the fields during our sports time, on a rare clear day, if a plane was flying high overhead, leaving a vapor trail, I would study its course to see if that plane might be heading back to Arabia—feeling a deep pang if it was. I longed, somehow, to jump aboard and go back home to my parents.

The brightest spot in any week came during breakfast time when mail was delivered. I would look anxiously for the telltale blue airmail letter that my mother sent faithfully every week. As the teachers came around the tables with letters to hand out, I would literally be on the edge of my bench waiting to see if one was for me. In so many senses this was

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Hogwarts, but without the owls and with none of the magic.

The blue airmail letters were often the highlight of my week, particularly in those early days when my loneliness was most acute. I would receive letters from home with such happiness and relief. I would wait until I could be alone to carefully unseal them and then eagerly read the messages of love, reassurance, and advice from my parents. I savored every line and felt, for those moments, closer to home and closer to my parents' love, and I received the courage I needed to continue on for another week.

There is much in the natural course of mortal life that can make us feel alone and afraid, even while we are surrounded by people, as I was at boarding school. And we all feel far from home at times. In fact, most of you *are* far from home while you are here at BYU. Perhaps this is a relatively new and painful experience for you and you are still finding it hard to adjust. Homesickness may continue to gnaw at you. For others, maybe you've been away from home for several semesters, or even several years, and you're accustomed to it. And, indeed, for some, perhaps being away from a situation in which you dealt with negative influences and difficult relationships has been a good thing and has given you a chance to begin to become the person you know you can be.

We don't send those blue airmail letters much anymore to keep in touch with home, as email, cell phones, Facebook, Skype, and Twitter have replaced old-fashioned letter writing. But messages from home, messages of love and reassurance and guidance, however they arrive at your door or in your inbox, can have a powerful influence in steadying you along your journey while you are away from home. They remind you that you are loved and cherished. Letters, cards, texts, emails, and phone calls from Mom and Dad, brothers and sisters, grandparents, relatives, and friends go

a long way to help us when we face challenges and adversity far from the comforts of home. I still gain strength and comfort from a phone call home to my mother in England. She is now ninety years old.

Of course in so many ways we are all far from home. The metaphor here with our eternal home is clear. We know we were blessed to be in the presence of our Father in Heaven, our Savior, and "many of the noble and great ones" (Abraham 3:22) in our premortal existence. We know we received our "first lessons" (D&C 138:56) from them and had many opportunities "to choose good or evil" and to "[exercise] exceedingly great faith" (Alma 13:3). We know we are here on earth to be proven, "to see if [we] will do all things whatsoever the Lord [our] God shall command [us]" (Abraham 3:25). Do you ever feel homesick and long for your eternal home and for the love and affirmation and pure truth and light we know exist there? Don't our spirits yearn to be where they know they belong best, there in the presence of our Father, "encircled about eternally in the arms of his love" (2 Nephi 1:15)?

Our Eternal Father has not let any of us leave home, leave His presence, without the opportunity to access His love and His guidance—every day of our lives. President Henry B. Eyring assures us, "[The Father] offers us, through prayer in the name of His Son, the opportunity to commune with Him in this life *as often as we choose*" ("Exhort Them to Pray," *Ensign*, February 2012, 4; emphasis added). Sometimes we forget this. Sometimes we doubt this. Sometimes we cut ourselves off from it. But He has endowed us all with the Light of Christ to enable us to judge right from wrong, to determine light from darkness and truth from error (see Moroni 7:16). As we repeatedly respond to the Light of Christ and train ourselves to "lay hold upon every good thing" (Moroni 7:19), we increase our sensitivity to the things of the Spirit and enhance our ability to receive the messages coming to us from

our eternal home. As often as we sincerely seek and are worthy to receive, our Eternal Father communicates with us through revelation—messages that come to us in the reflective moments of prayer, through the words and enlightenment of the scriptures, from the teachings of the prophets, or in the peaceful melodies of heavenly music. His messages are often quiet, and we *all* know that we can miss them if we are not ready to receive.

In fact, it is often *because* we are so busy receiving other messages that we impair our ability to receive the much-needed messages from our eternal home. We now live in a world in which messages surround us, even bombard us. Our smartphones, our computers, and our tablets are constantly buzzing, beeping, and vibrating with every new text, social media update, email, and photograph. It really is instant and insistent messaging.

This extraordinary technology, of course, can do enormous good. One example of that is how the glorious message of the gospel of Jesus Christ can be shared, streamed, and received through every kind of handheld device. But we must be selective in the messages we choose to receive. It is vital to our spiritual well-being that we do not consume so much of our time receiving good messages, or even better messages, that we make ourselves unavailable to receive the best messages (see Dallin H. Oaks, “Good, Better, Best,” *Ensign*, November 2007, 104–8).

Just as I could not will one of those blue airmail letters from my mother to appear every morning at breakfast time, we cannot force messages from our eternal home. The Lord decides when and how and what to communicate with us. It is true that “every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth” (Luke 11:10), but we must remember and take heart in the fact that “it shall be in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will” (D&C 88:68). We cannot demand messages of the Lord. We must wait upon Him.

But even as we wait upon Him, we continue to pursue Him and to persist in our petitions.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught:

Revelation is not a matter of pushing buttons, but of pushing ourselves, often aided by fasting, scripture study, and personal pondering.

. . . Revelation requires us to have a sufficient degree of personal righteousness, so that on occasion revelation may come to the righteous, unsolicited. [“Revelation,” First Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting, 11 January 2003 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 5]

There have been reminders recently of the golden age of manned space flight, particularly of the Apollo missions to the moon in the 1960s. These missions were incredible feats of science and engineering. The crew members were the brightest and most able of their class, launched into space atop the Saturn V rocket, still the most powerful machine ever made by man. Before they could land on the moon, however, their spacecraft had to be slowed to enter a lunar orbit. This meant doing something that—as with so much of this endeavor—had never been done before. And that was to travel around the far side, or so-called dark side, of the moon.

All the way there the crew had been able to be in constant radio contact with mission control in Houston. But when it came time for them to go around the far side of the moon, communication would be lost, as the moon would quite literally be between the spacecraft and the earth. All of the science, all of the engineering, and all of the collective intelligence of the most gifted and dedicated practitioners of this groundbreaking endeavor had not been able to come up with a way for them to communicate while they were around the dark side of the moon. So for forty-five agonizing minutes, all communication was lost with the crew. All they could do at mission control in Houston was

wait and hope and wait and pray as each of those forty-five minutes ticked tensely by. What if a problem arose and there were a malfunction of some kind? How would mission control know, and how could they possibly help?

Well, the spacecraft did emerge from around the far side of the moon, the radio signal was reacquired, and mission control must have erupted with shouts of relief and joy as the safety of the crew was confirmed.

And so it can so easily be for us. We can be, like those astronauts, astonishingly bright, capable, and gifted in our own ways—shooting for the moon. We can have had the most extraordinary learning experiences and been given remarkable opportunities for growth in our lives. Perhaps we have received exceptional teaching and training from parents, teachers, mission presidents, and leaders and have come far and learned much. We will have caught glimpses of our eternal potential, of our mission here on earth in this mortal phase of our existence. But in order to continue our progression on the course the Lord would have us set, and in order to return safely to our eternal home, we must remain in constant communication with Him. If we place barriers between ourselves and the source of that critical communication—revelation from our Heavenly Father—we will be unable to receive the messages of guidance we need from Him.

Problems will arise and malfunctions will occur as our mortal lives take their natural course. When they do, will we find that we have cut ourselves off from the one true source of our guidance and direction?

On this Valentine's Day, let us examine the condition of our hearts and how we are doing in receiving the messages of love, guidance, correction, and revelation from our Father, the great God and Creator of this universe. What barriers do we put between ourselves and the Lord? Do we sometimes figuratively place ourselves on the dark side of the moon, where we cannot hear from mission control?

There are many conditions of our hearts that may affect our ability to tune in to and receive the messages from our Heavenly Father. I will touch upon only three:

- Our hearts may be burdened by the cares of daily life and the clamor of the world.
- Our hearts may be hardened by sin or unworthiness.
- Our hearts may be malnourished by a poor digital diet.

First: Our Hearts May Be Burdened by the Cares of Daily Life and the Clamor of the World

We may not mean to do it, we may not even *know* we are doing it, but occasionally we can put ourselves around the dark side of the moon when our hearts become overburdened by the worries, pressures, irritations, and deadlines of daily life. We may not be facing anything all that unusual or experiencing a particularly stretching challenge, but our hearts can become blocked from the peace and comfort the Lord would give us because we are just too troubled and concerned. When we stay up too late and work too hard in order to meet our daily demands, fatigue sets in, we become overtired, and then the world looks to us a much gloomier place; things get out of perspective and out of proportion. There are papers to write, exams to take, research to do, jobs to fulfill, and maybe children to care for. There will be financial worries, family concerns, and questions of the soul over where to go next or what to do when this phase of life is complete. And on *this* day, how could I *not* make reference to the worries over dates, or the lack thereof; concerns over whether to become engaged; or indeed the want for such an opportunity.

You may not even realize just how much the noise and busyness of the world around you affects how you feel and alters your ability to

hear and receive the messages your Eternal Father has for you.

When you are feeling overwhelmed and overburdened, it seems impossible to find a way or a time to slow down, find a quiet space, and draw close to your Heavenly Father. Just the mere suggestion that you might carve out some time from your already overscheduled day increases the sense of pressure you feel. You may doubt that choosing to spend that segment of quiet time will actually yield enough benefit and so think your time is better spent getting on with something else. However, that's when problems arise and small glitches can turn into a major malfunction.

President Boyd K. Packer teaches a vital truth with regard to our hearts being burdened by the cares and clamor of daily life. He says:

*The Spirit does not get our attention by shouting or shaking us with a heavy hand. Rather it whispers. It caresses so gently that **if we are preoccupied we may not feel it at all.***

*Occasionally, it will press just firmly enough for us to pay heed. But most of the time, if we do not heed the gentle feeling, the Spirit will withdraw and wait until we come **seeking and listening.*** ["The Quest for Spiritual Knowledge," *New Era*, January 2007, 4; emphasis added]

We must each find and then guard a time each and every day to remember these words of the Lord: "All flesh is in mine hands; *be still* and know that I am God" (D&C 101:16; emphasis added). A segment of time when we can be *still*, quiet, and removed from our busyness will help recenter us, refocus our priorities, and bring us back into a position in which we can receive and feel the messages our Heavenly Father wishes to send to us. Remember, if our hearts are preoccupied, we may not be able to feel Father's messages. His voice "[is] not a harsh voice, neither [is] it a loud voice; nevertheless, . . . it being a small

voice it [does] pierce them that . . . hear to the center, . . . to the very soul, and [does] cause their hearts to burn" (3 Nephi 11:3). When we make ourselves ready and take the step of faith to put Him first at some point in our day (and why not first?), we find peace even in the midst of an otherwise hectic schedule. But we must make the choice to make it happen by putting Him first.

Second: Our Hearts May Be Hardened by Sin or Unworthiness

There can be no doubt that hearts carrying sin and unworthiness place barriers between themselves and God. Sometimes a heart can carry sin for so long that it becomes desensitized to spiritual things and becomes incapable of receiving and feeling the messages of the Lord. If there is something you carry in your heart today that is blocking you—in any degree—from truly connecting with your Heavenly Father and feeling His love and His plan for you, resolve now to put it right, let it go, give it up, or throw it out. Hearts become hardened by unworthiness, particularly when we continue to live as if that unworthiness is not actually there. This is compounded and complicated when we partake of the sacrament or participate in other ordinances as if our hearts were clean when really they are not.

Nephi teaches a beautiful truth when he says:

The Lord God worketh not in darkness.

*He doeth not **anything** save it be for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world, even that he layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him.* [2 Nephi 26:23–24; emphasis added]

In the spirit of that loving, tender reminder that He does nothing save it be for our benefit and that He laid down His life that He might draw each of us unto Him, the Savior Himself says:

Wherefore, I give unto them a commandment, saying thus: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy might, mind, and strength; and in the name of Jesus Christ thou shalt serve him. [D&C 59:5]

What is holding you back from giving Him your whole heart, your whole mind, and all your strength?

Let your hearts *feel* the reality of Lehi's teaching about your perfectly loving and perfectly forgiving Savior: "Behold, he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit" (2 Nephi 2:7). He offered Himself as a sacrifice for *you*, and His suffering can answer the ends of the law for *you*. "Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more" (D&C 58:42). Can we ever hear this promise too often?

These scriptures, and many others, can bring you the strength and the determination to act, to change, to repent, and to offer up to the Lord your broken heart and contrite spirit. He offered up His life for you. You can offer back your heart.

"I, the Lord, require the hearts of the children of men" (D&C 64:22).

Third: Our Hearts May Be Malnourished by a Poor Digital Diet

We may be suffering in many aspects of our lives, without fully recognizing it, because of a poor digital diet. As with so much in life, what we consume is a choice, so don't be surprised that if you spend much of your time consuming one kind of message that you become affected and influenced by it. Spending too much of our time with social media, celebrity or entertainment news, games, and the pursuit of online, time-hungry activities constitutes a poor digital diet. When we choose to consume the attitudes and opinions of the mass media, we will find our own values and viewpoints

following suit, and most of the time we don't even realize it is happening. We tell ourselves we're not being affected by these messages, but that is not possible.

Elder David A. Bednar posed these questions:

1. *Does the use of various technologies and media invite or impede the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost in your life?*

2. *Does the time you spend using various technologies and media enlarge or restrict your capacity to live, to love, and to serve in meaningful ways?* ["Things as They Really Are," *Ensign*, June 2010, 23]

A lot of the time we know what we need to change in our digital diet, but we don't do it. We say we're going to start tomorrow (don't diets always start "tomorrow"?), but there is little worth in saying that. The time to act is now. Otherwise we are bound by our own behavior and lack of grit to change it.

We also need to be aware that many of today's messages in the media can cause us to doubt our faith, compromise our convictions, and view the world through cynical eyes. But we *can* deflect deceptive messages with our faith intact if we are connected in a vibrant, continuous stream to the source of truth, to the source of light. If we have questions or doubts, *we* get our answers from the Father and Creator of this universe through the delicate and precious channels of revelation that operate when we remove all barriers to our hearts. *We* choose to "look to God and live" (Alma 37:47).

I love what President Boyd K. Packer has taught. He said, "We are not obedient because we are *blind*, we are obedient because we can *see*" ("Agency and Control," *Ensign*, May 1983, 66; emphasis added).

I recently experienced a reminder to watch my own digital diet when I had been consumed with a particular strand of news stories one

day. I had a sense that I had spent too much time on it, but it was only when later I picked up a book by Elder Dallin H. Oaks and read a few chapters that I became acutely aware of the contrast. The difference between the feelings that I experienced was like the contrast between night and day. The news I had been so consumed with left me feeling unsettled and uneasy whilst the book brought me peace and a sense of order and calm. This seems to be a lesson we need to learn several times over.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught:

Never mind if the world doesn't understand or even mocks this sacred process [of revelation]. Paul said, "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). ["Revelation," 5]

Conclusion

We believe that we are that we might have joy (see 2 Nephi 2:25), and that means joy here and now—today!—as well as in eternity. It is hard for us to feel joy, however, when we make choices that block the very messages that bring it to us.

As you examine the condition of your heart and the barriers you may be putting in the way of your communication with God, *you will know what you need to do. You will know what you need to change. I invite you to act now.* Be bold in choosing to remove any obstruction to the sweet, comforting, guiding messages of love from your Father in Heaven.

The most important message any of us could receive or carry is a reminder of who we are and how we are loved by our Eternal

Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. When the truth and reality of this message sink deep into our hearts, we cannot remain around the dark side of the moon. We are drawn back to Them—back to Their love, back to Their light, and back to Their arms.

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf fervently declared:

Brothers and sisters, the most powerful Being in the universe is the Father of your spirit. He knows you. He loves you with a perfect love.

*. . . He wants you to know that **you matter to Him.** ["You Matter to Him," *Ensign*, November 2011, 22; emphasis added]*

My witness to you today is that your Eternal Father in Heaven is real. He lives, and He loves you, adores you, and cherishes you—every single one of you, especially those of you who are thinking, "Well, not me." Especially those of you who may be thinking, "Well, not me." He especially loves you.

Jesus Christ is His Son, His gift to us all, the Savior of all mankind.

I conclude with the words of President Thomas S. Monson:

*Remember that one with authority placed his hands on your head at the time of your confirmation and said, "Receive the Holy Ghost." **Open your hearts**, even your very souls, to the sound of that special voice which **testifies of truth**. As the prophet Isaiah promised, "Thine ears shall hear a word . . . saying, **This is the way, walk ye in it**" (Isaiah 30:21). ["Be Thou an Example," *Ensign*, May 2005, 113; emphasis added]*

In the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.