

“We, Being Many, Are One”

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These are the last few hours of classes for winter semester, giving yet additional meaning to the phrase “endure to the end!” The end of a semester, for many of us in the university community, invites as much attention to resolutions as the end of the calendar year—to study more, eat right, change a major, etc.

I remember a poem I wrote in high school titled “Procrastination.” It described the conditions under which I resolved to initiate actions to move my intention into behavior. It was a series of if/then episodes depicting more ideal conditions that were “worthy” of my waiting.

Certainly not all of our interest in the future is a product of procrastinating. We look to the future anticipating the results of the day-to-day effort required to achieve goals. We also look forward desiring blessings or experiences that are in the Lord’s timing. The fact that some experiences cannot (or should not) be ours until conditions change can, however, become a rather large umbrella under which we stack too many of our intentions—and therefore procrastinate what can be changed now.

Are there not ways in which we withhold effort, waiting for better conditions in which we could live the gospel more fully—the better

ward, the right spouse, more resources, after we move, etc.? Are there not ways we attempt to make others accountable for our responsibility to live the gospel?

Postponing repentance or pondering what we need to give up or give more of to follow our Savior delays realizing what is possible now.

I want to focus on the possibilities that are ours as a community of Saints. I know there are times when waiting is required—individually and as a people. I know that individual righteousness and family relationships are very important. I want to testify of that which each of us can do now, independent of our immediate circumstances, to create in our collective lives more that is possible from fully, joyously seeking and struggling together to live the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“We, being many, are one” is a statement of both diversity and inclusion—a description with us from the beginning and about us as a people. Romans 12:4–5 states:

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For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office:

So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and everyone members one of another.

Our common gospel ground begs our attention as the container of the many who are one. Each of us has “gifts differing” (Romans 12:6), and each of us is required to “always remember” that the gifts are “given unto the church” (see D&C 46:10).

Continuing in D&C 46:12: “To some is given one, and to some is given another, that all may be profited thereby.”

How may all profit? First, I’d like to present a definition of oneness that serves us now. Then I will highlight three aspects of being many that accelerate our being one. Although there is a oneness that is as yet beyond our common experience, there is a oneness that each of us can nourish now. Were our eyes not veiled, we would clearly see that the full spectrum of the many are already one with us—those we like; those who irritate us; those we want to talk to; those we admire; those we want to avoid; those of all shapes, sizes, colors, and incomes. We are already one in seeking to return to a heavenly home we once knew. We are already one in our imperfect state. We are already one in that each has spiritual gifts. We are already one in each having the capacity—whatever our circumstance—to grow. We are one already.

Though we may be ranked, divided, graded, and rewarded by secular measures, by a common spiritual measure, you and I know each of us is as valued as the person next to us by a just and merciful Savior—a value that surpasses any worldly appraisal. We can simultaneously know of the Lord’s great love for each of us and for all of us—a knowledge that enables us to place our difference in his service, seeing oneness rather than competition. John 21:20–22 contains a conversation between Peter and Jesus illustrating that we need not

be in competition for experience, since we are equally asked to follow our Savior:

Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following. . . .

Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do?

Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.

Being many is not a threat to our individual gospel livelihood. It is a necessity for us to demonstrate obedience to the two great commandments on which “hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:40):

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

This is the first and great commandment.

And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. [Matthew 22:37–39]

Can we manage being many and being one? What does it take to love the Lord and our neighbor as ourself? Each of us knows the frustrations of not having sufficient time or resources for the things we want to do or the assignments we have been given. In our secular tasks it is possible that the behavior of someone else will block an opportunity: the book we needed is checked out, the computer lab isn’t open twenty-four hours, too many tests are scheduled in the same week. Such is the limited and imperfect nature of temporal resources that can generate both competition and comparisons.

However, to help us obey the first and second commandments, we have unlimited gospel resources—twenty-four-hour access through obedience, prayer, fasting, and faith to guide all our actions and achieve salvation. Others around me, instead of being seen as competition for an opportunity, can now be seen as the source of my opportunities to serve, to love with all my heart, soul, and

mind. As Saints, whether we are in Belgium, Beijing, or Bountiful, we have the same assignments and one Shepherd: “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Seeing our oneness, we see our relationship to one another.

The lyrics of Ron and Carol Harris say:

In this very room, there is quite enough love for one like me;

In this very room, there is quite enough joy for one like me;

Quite enough hope, quite enough power to chase away any gloom.

For Jesus, Lord Jesus, is in this very room.

[“In This Very Room,” Ron Harris Publications, 1979]

The next verse affirms there is quite enough for all of us, and the last verse tells us there is quite enough love for all the world.

Each of us is an ingredient in that oneness we will know as a Zion people and can know in this very room.

We know some of our oneness as we experience the unfolding of the gospel in missionary work and as we collectively respond in times of need. But what about day-to-day possibilities? Even Mondays? What is possible?

Peter Senge writes about the “learning organization” in organizational behavior literature and describes a current state and a desired state or vision of what is possible. He, as have others, indicates that seeing both is very important. The distance between the two he labels “creative tension,” a required zone that energizes organizational members to stretch toward what is possible while they are aware of their current situation (Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* [New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990], p. 150). Creative tension is an interesting term for what can be a vast area between what we currently do and what we are capable of

doing. But as a descriptive term it is way ahead of “zone of guilt.”

Areas of creative tension exist for us as a community of Saints—they are opportunities for our mutual development and progression. We have many resources. I am impressed, almost overcome, with the increasing presence of goodness, which is not governed by ego, inequity, or evil. It is the spiritual companionship the Saints are promised to match these times. The same Spirit affects our many lives differently; the quality of our collective response will “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17).

I would like to comment on three things that can accelerate our being one.

First: *Doubt not that your contribution matters.*

We may think of doubt as a personal condition, but doubt is contagious. Seeing ourselves as one of the many—hundreds in a ward or thousands in a community—we may doubt the importance of our individual effort. We may wait for a better opportunity or look to someone else in another capacity or with other gifts to make a contribution. Yet each of us contributes to the spirit in a meeting or the feeling in a ward.

Have you seen a wonderful mosaic—individual pieces of tile carefully placed together creating a wonderful whole? We notice when one is missing.

On other occasions we notice what just one contributes and how each contribution accumulates.

The Relief Society General Board adopted a stretch of I-215. We have become very acquainted with that portion of our interstate. Walking along the road and collecting items ranging from soda-straw wrappers to empty paint cans, a few of us got into a conversation imagining how this situation was created. We knew we were not at the scene of a single garbage truck rollover. No, here was visibly the moment-by-moment, day-by-day product of individual actions, some, unfortunately,

intentional and some unintentional that created the whole.

As Saints our oneness is a product of our day-to-day interaction with each other. Intentional comments that label each other and behavior we judge with certainty—these contribute with greater magnitude than we may see at the moment. Our single acts of kindness, prayer, and love also accumulate. What do we individually contribute to the whole?

President Hinckley’s message “Our One Bright Hope” talks about our Savior and our contribution:

*As His followers, we cannot do a mean or shoddy or ungracious thing without tarnishing His image. Nor can we do a good and gracious and generous act without burnishing more brightly the symbol of Him whose name we have taken upon ourselves. [Gordon B. Hinckley, “Our One Bright Hope,” *Ensign*, April 1994, p. 5]*

What we do matters to the Lord and to each of us.

I have the opportunity to hear from some of the many among us in information-gathering meetings on Church assignment with Relief Society wards or stakes. Participants talk about their experiences of living the gospel. Each time it is visibly apparent that although we are committed to living the gospel, we are vulnerable to each other’s behavior. We have a great capacity to influence each other, either helping or hindering. If our commitment to the gospel is less certain, we may be even more vulnerable to how we are treated.

Some of us may be insensitive to how we treat others. Some of us may be too attentive to what others do and use our interpretations of their behavior as the explanation of our experience in the Church. Some of us are so sensitive to the needs of others that we do not care well for ourselves. And some of us may intentionally misinterpret the contributions of others.

It is important to remember that among us, collectively as a people, we have the resources and divine guidance to manage differences of experience while at the same time affirming the truthfulness of principles. If we only examine our differences, we may lose the opportunity to apply the love, patience, and service that gathers difference into the whole.

Doubt not that you have an important role in our common effort to demonstrate the profound effect of the Savior’s teachings within our common ground as well as in our homes and individual lives.

When we do look more closely at what we individually contribute, we will see that there is more to do—almost more than we can do—that will keep that creative tension alive. Where we focus our attention can determine what we contribute.

I decided to learn to ski with my niece and nephew. They were quite young. Their whole attention was on the joy of skiing. When we worked with an instructor, they were quite animated about what they could learn and were quick to want more instruction. Theirs was the end goal, and they wanted more information on how to get there as soon as possible.

I, however, was focused on determining whether or not this instructor knew that I was a competent person in other arenas—being a beginning skier was not my sole identity. Looking back I see that I wanted my good intention to ski to be acknowledged more than my current performance. It would have been more useful for me to honestly acknowledge my current ability and focus on the goal.

It is our agency to choose the focus in relating to others. Our choices have immediate and long-term effects. I have talked with members of my community who wanted to be sure that I knew of their assessment of my “place” as a woman. I have talked with those in my community who wanted to be sure I knew my worth as a daughter of God. The quality of these relationships differed dramatically.

I know also that I behave in ways that affect others. What we do matters to each of us and to all of us.

Doubt not that humility is an important part of becoming one, especially since the promptings that would instruct us—that ask us to stretch our performance, to be more kindly and affectionate toward one another, to look past our own needs—come from an Instructor who already knows us individually and collectively and who wants us to succeed.

We, being many, will be varied in our experience and yet can be one in our willingness to create Zion among us. We may not be able to predict individual needs, but we can heed the promptings of the Spirit. We may suggest someone talk with his or her bishop; we can offer time, materials, or other specific resources; we may comfort someone whose experience is unlike ours but whose worth is as great as ours to him who loves us all; we may signal a thumbs-up acknowledgment of someone else's accomplishment. Our choices let others know what happens to them matters to us whether or not we think we matter to them.

Do you remember the example Elder Ballard gave in the recent general conference of a ward council discussion on reverence? He reported the council's discussion of reverence and the bishop's request for suggestions on how to improve. One woman suggested there was one member who could do a lot to change the reverence before meetings. When asked who, she said, "You, Bishop." The bishop and his counselors set a goal to be seated on the stand as the meeting began. It made a difference. (See M. Russell Ballard, "Counseling with Our Councils," *Ensign*, May 1994, p. 25.)

What if she doubted that she should speak, hoping someone else would? What if her comments were not heard? I believe it is the quality of the relationships that each of us contributes to that enables information to be exchanged whereby we all may profit.

We need each member's gifts. When Bill Dyer was my stake president, he addressed a leadership session and asked that the measure of our relationships reflect the scripture in D&C 20:53, to "be with and strengthen."

I know there is information about our individual and collective experience that can be difficult to share and to hear. I am concerned when the effort to report an experience is used by others to put further distance between us. For example, learning of some of the perceptions of minority students (both U.S. and international) in my college concerned me. Hearing the reactions to their perceptions concerned me even more. We, being many, have much to learn from each other so we can be one. In each situation the same principles can apply: earnestly seek to be one, humbly commit ourselves to demonstrate the gospel in our daily interactions, desire to be with and strengthen, and be open to spiritual instruction. These principles serve both the simplicity and the complexity of our personal and congregational lives.

We will be known as his disciples if we have love one to another. Doubt not that we have the day-to-day opportunity to be among those who start that expression of love as well as to be among those who are so in need of it.

There is a second dimension that will accelerate a oneness we can know now: *Offer daily to be of use to the Lord.*

Being many, there are multiple circumstances where we could be of use. The largest area of creative tension between what we actually do and what we could do may not be in the extraordinary moments, but in the ordinary. What can we learn when we inventory our readiness in our daily interactions to be of greater use to the Lord in establishing his kingdom?

This image of being of use to the Lord is conveyed quite vividly in this scripture:

The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour.

If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work. [2 Timothy 2:19–21]

Our obedience in keeping his commandments, our willingness to be tested, our willingness to progress spiritually shape us as a vessel for his further use. Let us each take full responsibility for the condition of the vessel we are for every good work of our Master. Because agency is a fundamental principle—in addition to our preparation—it is our opportunity and blessing to offer. No doubt we can be useful to the Lord by our righteous living and genuine concern for others. Might we be of more use if we repeatedly initiate the request to be of use—even in ways we may not know?

Offering is a statement of our willingness to do his will; it is not a state of passivity. We know there are many things to do.

King Benjamin's message in Mosiah asked the many who had gathered to "impart of the substance that ye have one to another" (Mosiah 4:21). Substance can have both a temporal and a spiritual meaning. Consider two things we can daily offer to impart: our attention and encouragement.

What do we notice about those around us? Do we see a community? Do we listen? Do we inquire? Do we respond to their questions—even when we disagree, or maybe especially if we disagree?

Do we feel inconvenienced when asked to respond to someone else's needs? I trust the Spirit will help us discern when we are not the person to respond, but I want to focus on those times when we know we could. Attention need not mean we are responsible for their experience,

it means we can respond—share our reactions, feelings, offer opinions.

Attending to the experience of someone else should not be confused with the process of judging someone else. Watching my neighbor to see what she is doing can quickly become a judgment about what *is* she doing?—a judgment I may then pass on to others as fact rather than offering to discuss it more with her.

There was a time in my life when my circumstances as a single, working woman created more interest in those not of my faith than in those in my religious community. The attention and genuine interest in who I was by my friends who were not Mormons was compelling and began to affect my activity in my ward. I was drawn to those who were interested in me, rather than to those whose comments indicated that their focus was primarily on what I wasn't—not married, not dating enough, and not available because of my work schedule. However, one visiting teacher paid attention to me. She learned about my interests, about my schedule, and asked that I teach a specific Relief Society lesson on a Sunday when she knew I would be in town. Her attention changed my experience in the Church. Later I could see better how my contribution could have been different. I could have been more forgiving, I could have articulated my needs, I could have judged less, I could have been more accepting of my own difference within my ward community. I could have offered to be of more use to the Lord. But at that time, it was her attention that enabled me to regenerate my growth.

Encouragement is another tangible dimension of love that we each can offer—especially when we take the time to encourage those who already do something better than we do or those who appear to have more. It is not hard to encourage someone whose test scores are lower than yours. But what about someone who does something better than you do who could do even more with his or her talent? Do

we seek to comfort those who have materially more comforts than we have?

Remembering we are already one, we can see more clearly the effort of another daughter or son of God and see where our attention and encouragement can be of use.

There is a particular tension between encouraging talent and presuming the conditions necessary for the expression of that ability. Our encouragement need not be conditional on our judgment of what we think the other's circumstances may be. Assumptions can cause discouragement—assumptions like “He’s the least attentive student in my class,” “He can’t do better,” or “She doesn’t need to be a research assistant. She ought to be married.” Our encouragement can certainly be about specific talents and gospel responsibility. Encouraging someone to do very well in school or to make careful choices about the development of their talents can be coupled with the encouragement to offer all that they are for the Lord’s use. Encouraging the intelligence and talent of each young man and woman is an investment in the growth of the kingdom. We may not know when and how what they accomplish will serve the Lord.

This kind of prayerful attending and encouraging can also be called ministering. It is not driven by a desire to be right or to be popular. Think of the times when you knew someone cared about who you were. Think of the words that reminded you of your primary worth. Think of the actions that demonstrated love. We can daily offer these to others.

How is it that we can offer to be of more use—even to offer that which we may not have felt in our lives? There are day-to-day demands on all of us. How is it we can encourage and give our attention to the experience of the others around us?

When we accept more fully the attention of our Savior to our life and to our every need, when we acknowledge that he knows the desires of our hearts, when we remember to

seek first the kingdom of God, we will have ample substance to impart. As my testimony of his redeeming love grows, I further seek to be his disciple. Being so attended, I can transcend my needs in a moment and offer more.

I have been humbled by another encompassing dimension of our Savior’s life that continually prompts me to serve and encourage others. In Romans 15:1–3 we read:

We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.

Let everyone of us please his neighbour for his good to edification.

For even Christ pleased not himself.

For even Christ pleased not himself. Multiple times during a week I have chosen my pleasure over service. This verb *pleased* is quite compelling. Even though I seek to love the Lord and serve my neighbor, much of my discretionary time is still organized to “please myself.”

There are those around us who do not seek to please themselves and whose daily offerings mirror our Savior’s. Let us follow their lead.

There is a third and final aspect that can link us now: *Believe all things work together for good to them that love God.*

This is a gospel of love that enables us to be many as we are one. The quality of our personal offering to our collective life makes a difference and moves us toward Zion.

Some days I need to remind myself that what I can do or have is an “offering”—not the best thing that should have been done, or the right course of action, but an offering. The most challenging aspect of serving together may be when we do know we can contribute, when we are offering and encouraging, and then we learn that another direction or idea is wanted. I am amazed sometimes that my best idea is not the one accepted.

Our contribution to oneness, then, will echo in a small way that of our elder brother:

“Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done”
(Luke 22:42).

All things will work together for good.
Each of us contributes now to that which we
will become as a people.

I pray that we may every day align our will
so that “we, being many,” may be “one body in
Christ, and everyone members one of another.”
I pray this humbly, in the name of Jesus Christ.
Amen.