

Thoughts about Thoughts

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It's a privilege, brothers and sisters, to join with you this morning for this devotional assembly. I'm really not a stranger to the BYU campus. I've been enrolled here as a graduate student. We have two daughters who have been students here at BYU and one daughter-in-law and one son-in-law who will be graduating at the conclusion of this Summer Term.

I have no real difficulty in identifying with any of the colleges and universities in the northern part of the state. I began my college education at the University of Utah with a basketball scholarship there. I later transferred to Utah State University, where I was graduated. I've also taught at the institute adjacent to the Weber State College campus. So I have no problem in dividing my loyalties among these schools, all of which are excellent institutions.

The Power of Thoughts

I would like to share with you this morning some thoughts about thoughts. While serving as a mission president, I was interested in the frequency with which missionaries in our personal interviews would ask me this question: "President, how do I control my thoughts?" In that intensive environment, where a keen level of spirituality was so essential to the success of the missionaries, it didn't take long for these young men and young women to realize

that a high level of spiritual power was necessary for them in order to succeed and that thoughts were very instrumental in the acquisition of that power and influence.

I've been intrigued for many years about thoughts and the compelling power of thoughts. In the children's classic *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, Mrs. Burnett gives us these observations in children's language:

One of the new things people began to find out in the last century was that thoughts, just mere thoughts, were as powerful as electric batteries, as good for one as sunlight is, or as bad for one as poison is. To let a sad thought or a bad thought get into your mind is as dangerous as letting a scarlet fever germ get into your body. If you let it stay there after it has got in, you may never get over it so long as you live.

Thoughts have a great deal to do with how we live, whether we're enthusiastic or depressed, whether we enjoy success or experience a degree of failure, whether we enjoy

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spirituality or suffer from a lack of it, and in many respects, I believe, whether we are obedient or disobedient to the laws of God. Some modern behaviorists have indicated that the human thought process is very much like the operation of a computer where the conscious and subconscious mind is concerned. The input which we take into that process has much to do with the output in terms of attitude, mood, and behavior. The Lord has recognized the great power of thoughts, and he warned those whom he addressed in his Sermon on the Mount against the influence of evil or negative thoughts. Proverbs tells us that as a man "thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7). To paraphrase that slightly, I think it would be very accurate to say that, as a man persists in his thinking, so he will become. There is that kind of power in thoughts.

The Lord has even indicated that we will be judged in some measure on the basis of our thoughts. In the Doctrine and Covenants, section 88, he describes the ushering in of the millennial period and the summoning forth for judgment of all those who have inhabited the earth during its millennia of existence. He describes those who lived upon the earth in the first thousand years who are called forth by the sounding of a trump. He also says, "And then shall the second angel sound his trump, and reveal the secret acts of men, and the thoughts and intents of their hearts, and the mighty works of God in the second thousand years" (D&C 88:109). "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he."

The Thought Process

How do we control this awesome power? How do we use it not only to prevent and defend ourselves from the possible detrimental and evil influence of bad thoughts, but also to utilize this great power to achieve the fulfillment of life's purpose for us here as the Lord would have us do? I remember vividly a description which Elder Marion D. Hanks

gave at one time of one's thought processes. Elder Hanks pointed out that we have two compartments in our thinking apparatus. He referred to the one as a foyer or antechamber, and he indicated that none of us really has complete power over the impulses, the fleeting thoughts, that come into that antechamber area. We are prompted by things that we may see or hear or smell, those impulses that come constantly into a mind that is ever active. Then Elder Hanks pointed out that, as unwelcome visitors in our home where we live, we have the power to usher out almost instantaneously those negative thoughts which come into that antechamber. It's very essential that we develop the capacity to do this. Elder Hanks also pointed out that, when we have made that kind of sorting out of the thought impulses that come to us, we invite into the living room of our thoughts and to our hearts, as it were, those thoughts that will do us good and prompt us to do the things that are right. That illustration has been helpful to me in developing some discipline and capacity to control thoughts and to avoid the negative, as well as to invite that which is constructive and positive and good. It requires great discipline to take the greatest advantage of the thought process.

I learned in the mission field, as many of you who have served missions will know, that an interesting phenomenon occurs with missionaries who are assigned to an area where immediate success may not be attached to their work. Occasionally missionaries would call me or write to me and say, "President, we have worked this area out. There is no one here we can baptize." I had to agree with what they said because, when they came to that conclusion, they indeed could *not* find anyone. Generally I made an immediate transfer of those missionaries from that area. It was always interesting and curious to note that those who replaced them, if their thoughts were right and if the data being fed into their

computers were correct, would often go out and find great success where the others had failed.

I've learned that our moods, our attitudes toward daily living and toward each other, are in large measure regulated by our thoughts. I believe, to a large degree, I can control whether or not I am happy today or unhappy, whether I'm enthusiastic about my possibilities or depressed and negative. I've discovered, as perhaps you have, that if I allow myself to slip into a pattern of negative, depressed thinking—although my circumstances have not changed—I can make myself very unhappy and make my prospects seem extremely dim. I can reverse that almost as easily by replacing those thoughts with others that are constructive.

Let me relate another sentence or two from Mrs. Burnette's observations in this same children's classic I referred to above. She tells about a boy, Colin, who is one of the interesting characters in this story:

So long as Colin shut himself up in his room and thought only of his fears and weaknesses and his detestation of people who looked at him and reflected hourly on humps and early death, he was a hysterical, half-crazy little hypochondriac who knew nothing of the sunshine and the spring and also did not know that he could get well and stand upon his feet if he tried to do it. When new, beautiful thoughts began to push out the old, hideous ones, life began to come back and his blood ran healthfully through his veins and strength poured into him like a flood. His scientific experiment was quite practical and simple. There was nothing weird about it at all. Much more surprising things can happen to anyone who, when a disagreeable or discouraged thought comes into his mind, just has the sense to remember in time and push it out by putting in an agreeable, determinedly courageous one. Two things cannot be in one place. Where you tend a rose, my lad, a thistle cannot grow.

Negative Versus Constructive Thinking

I've heard counsel given with regard to devices that might be used to protect us temporarily from the effects of bad thoughts or evil thoughts. I've heard the suggestion that we might sing a song, a phrase from a Latter-day Saint hymn, or recite some poetry or some verses of scripture. But this, in reality, is a defensive stance. One cannot always be on defense against evil thoughts. One must assume the offense. The best way I've learned to achieve this is to practice sustained, constructive thinking. That's an exercise, brothers and sisters, that requires as much training and as much conditioning as the physical endurance required to run a long-distance race. I commend to you this morning the "exercise" of sustained constructive thinking.

As a mission president I traveled great distances over the state of Texas. (You can drive a long way in the state of Texas!) I used to spend many hours traveling alone, going from one missionary meeting or one set of interviews to another in the automobile that was provided for us. There was a lot of time to think, and many thoughts come in a situation of that kind. I discovered that it was a very helpful thing for me (and later very useful) if I used that time to practice organizing talks that I could give, forming associations of scriptural ideas and principles that would be helpful to me in expressing these relationships to others. Some of the best talks you'll never hear, I gave to myself as I drove from one place to another in southern Texas. I recommend, that process to you. In order to sustain constructive thinking, it's necessary for us to have something worthwhile to think about, to have in reserve, as it were, some items, some problems, some challenges, to which we can turn our minds, to think our way through to a solution. I've discovered in my own life that that's the best way to obtain inspiration and whatever degree of revelation we are entitled to.

I think of the account Enos gives in the Book of Mormon. Enos, on a day when he apparently was free and had set out for a purpose somewhat different from the result that was achieved, was alone hunting for beasts. But his thoughts began to run upon the things that he had heard his father say with regard to eternal life: "Behold, I went to hunt beasts in the forests; and the words which I had often heard my father speak concerning eternal life, and the joy of the saints, sunk deep into my heart" (Enos 3). They went into the living room of his thoughts where the greatest effect can be found. Then Enos had some marvelous experiences as he focused his thoughts upon the acquisition of a blessing from God. One who has not shared that experience with Enos, who has not reached out to the extent of his own thinking ability and then found the union that's possible with the pure intelligence which will respond to that kind of effort, has missed a great experience. I testify to you that the Lord responds to that kind of thinking. Anyone who will reach out with the thought of his heart and all the intent of his heart for that kind of acquisition will not go wanting.

Not long ago I had a young lady come to my office who was engaged and soon to be married. As we talked about a number of things, she said, "How can I be sure, now, having gone through this experience of my life where I've had some tentative attachments to a number of young men and where I've been exploring and considering many possibilities and have made a lasting choice of an eternal companion, that I can focus all my loyalties with him, that I can be true, not only in deed but also in my thoughts and the intents of my heart?" I talked with her about the great need for discipline, for disciplining one's thoughts, for never considering any other possibilities. One must control his thoughts if he's to achieve that.

Scriptural Lessons about Thoughts

One of the greatest lessons taught in all of the literature available to us with regard to the power of thought is the story of King David in the Old Testament. As a young man, David demonstrated a courage and a strength and a power that likely has not been equaled in all of the great characters of the scriptures. He fought with wild beasts and overcame them, defeated the giant Goliath virtually with his hands, and then served through many years as the leader of Israel and demonstrated in the process tremendous control, tremendous discipline. The greatest enemy he had, perhaps, through most of these years—at least the greatest threat to his existence—was the man Saul. Yet on several occasions when David could have removed this threat by taking the life of Saul, who was in his hands, he withheld and controlled those impulses. That demonstrated tremendous power and control. Then later in his life, as a mature man with all the strength that kind of life had brought him, David was unwise. It was not because David was weak that he fell. He was unwise. I suspect that David had reached the point where he felt he was strong enough to indulge the entertainment of some enticing possibilities. On the day he stood on his rooftop and observed the wife of one of his officers, instead of taking himself by the nape of the neck, so to speak, and saying, "David, get out of here!" David remained. David thought about the possibilities, and those thoughts overcame David and eventually controlled him. One of the saddest entries in all of our scripture, I think, is that which the Lord gave the Prophet Joseph Smith in section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Speaking of David's situation today, he said, "For he hath fallen from his exaltation, and received his portion" (D&C 132:39). And then, with reference to David's wives and families, the Lord said, "For I gave them unto another, saith the Lord" (D&C 132:39). David, King David, one of the great and powerful men of

the Old Testament times, could have been today among the gods if he had controlled his thoughts.

There is compelling power in thoughts. There is compelling strength in thoughts that will bring to us the things that are good. The Savior, as he spoke to some of his followers in Jerusalem, made this observation: “For out of the abundance of the heart [I suspect he had reference here to the living room of our mind to which Elder Hanks made reference] the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things” (Matthew 12:34–35). He also said, “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Matthew 15:19). It’s no wonder then that the Savior would warn that one who entertained these things in his mind, in his thoughts, was guilty of something approaching the very act and would indeed, if he sustained those kinds of thoughts, become guilty of the act.

In his final challenge and admonition to us, Moroni indicated the power and the promise of pondering things in our hearts. He said, “Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall read these things, if it be wisdom in God that ye should read them, that ye would remember . . .” (Moroni 10:3). Then he went on and made reference to the things that had transpired and said, “Even down unto the time that ye shall receive these things, and ponder it in your hearts” (Moroni 10:3). That is an exercise. That’s a labor, brothers and sisters. That’s some of the most engaging and difficult work that you can do—pondering these things in your hearts. Moroni then made the promise with regard to the blessing of testimony through the power and the influence of the Holy Ghost.

The Blessings of Constructive Thinking

I would like to bear testimony to you today, brothers and sisters, that there is great power in thoughts and that, if we will exercise control and develop the discipline which is needed to sustain positive, constructive thinking, there will be great blessings come into our lives.

One of the young missionaries who came into our mission shortly before we left, in one of the last testimony meetings that Sister Larsen and I attended with our missionaries, bore a testimony which was simple, yet profound. The more I contemplate it, the more profound it becomes to me. He said, “I’ve learned already, having been in the mission field only several weeks, that the gospel is just as true for those who reject it as it is for those who accept it.” I’m sure this young man had in mind that in the great body of eternal principles which comprise the gospel of Jesus Christ there are forces at work which inevitably react in one way or another upon our lives—depending, in great measure, upon how we think about them. He meant, I’m sure, that in whatever we think, in whatever we say, in whatever we do, we evoke from those eternal principles some response for good or ill which inevitably reflects itself in the very nature of our own souls.

We testify to one another regularly that the gospel of Jesus Christ is true, and it *is* true. It is truly the gospel of Jesus Christ, as opposed to any other life systems or life plans that may have been advanced by other men. It is truly his gospel. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is truly the church of Jesus Christ, as opposed to other organizations that may have been contrived by men. The gospel is true in that it will yield to us from those principles, according to the way we think and act and feel, those things which have been promised to us. In that sense, my brothers and sisters, the gospel of Jesus Christ is also true—irrevocably, unyieldingly, everlastingly true.

May we be blessed with the power to control our thoughts that the most productive benefits can come to us as a result. May we be blessed with a desire to guide our thoughts into those channels where loyalties to things that are good and true will be sustained, where evil can be avoided, and where the promises of the Lord which he has made to all of us who are faithful will one day be ours. That we may

enjoy his presence in the eternities to come and be recipients of all the power and the glory that he's promised to those of us who are faithful, I pray. I invoke the Lord's blessings upon all of you, in your endeavors here, to improve your capacities and your talents and to regulate your thoughts, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.