

Some Lessons I Learned from Living Sixty Years

DEAN L. LARSEN

I always feel inadequate when responding to an invitation to speak to a group such as this. I commend you for the interest you have in self-improvement that has brought you to the BYU campus for the special activities associated with Campus Education Week. It has been my sincere desire in preparing for the remarks I will share with you today to deal with matters that will be relevant and of some practical value for you. I recognize the need I have for the blessings of the Spirit, and I have earnestly prayed for that blessing on my own behalf as well as for you.

We Are Still Short of Perfection

When I was younger, I used to wonder if I would ever live to be sixty years old. It seemed like a very advanced age not so many years ago. Now that I have passed that milestone, I find myself reflecting more frequently and more seriously upon things that I need to do with the time that is left—improvements that need to be made, weaknesses that need to be overcome. Earlier it always seemed that there would be enough time for dealing with these things. Now I am not so sure. The imperfections I have always been aware of are, in too many instances, still there. I think some

progress has occurred as time has passed. But has it really kept pace with the opportunities that have come and the expectations that others have held out for me? How well have I been qualifying myself in the Lord's eyes? I wonder about this frequently. Is there a possibility that I can measure up to his expectations in the time that is left?

These are sobering reflections.

When I am conscious of the imperfections in my own life and am aware of the frailties that exist in the lives of others, even men and women for whom I have the greatest love, reverence, and respect—I wonder how the Lord will be able to accomplish his purposes through such weak vessels. I also realize, with increasing awe as my own life passes, how magnificent was that one perfect life—that of the Savior Jesus Christ—and how absolutely dependent all of us are upon the mercy that is extended to us through his atoning sacrifice.

Dean L. Larsen was a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 18 August 1987.

One of the lessons I have learned from living as long as I have is that all of God's mortal children, save that one perfect Son, are imperfect. God must accomplish his work through those of us who are still struggling toward some degree of perfection. The determination to endure in this struggle is what seems to set some apart from others.

In my readings of the Book of Mormon I am repeatedly impressed by the greatness of the character and the spiritual powers of Nephi, the son of Lehi. To me, Nephi has always been one of the most valiant, faithful Christians who has ever lived. He seems almost superhuman to me. As I have read of his life and ministry, I have found myself standing up against the enormous spiritual image that he casts and feeling myself a pygmy by comparison. He seems so perfect in so many of the things in which I am grossly imperfect. I find it, for this reason, a little hard to relate to him. He is somewhat beyond me.

And yet this marvelous man, the spiritual giant, reveals his humanness and imperfection to us in the remarkable soliloquy he pronounces in the fourth chapter of the second book bearing his name in the Book of Mormon. In this recorded outpouring of his soul he makes no attempt at self-justification. He doesn't seek for our sympathy or our empathy. His cry is simply the honest acknowledgement that, notwithstanding the stature to which he has attained in the eyes of God and man and the remarkable success that he has enjoyed in administering the work of the Lord, in his own eyes he is still short of the perfection that his soul longs for. He says,

Behold, my soul delighteth in the things of the Lord; and my heart pondereth continually upon the things which I have seen and heard.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the great goodness of the Lord, in showing me his great and marvelous works, my heart exclaimeth: O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of

my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities.

I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me.

And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins; nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted. [2 Nephi 4:16-19]

Nephi then confesses his dependence upon the love and the strength that flow to him from the presence of God, without which he simply is as other men. In the light of this love and the never-failing source of strength, Nephi finds hope and reassurance. He continues,

O then, if I have seen so great things, if the Lord in his condescension unto the children of men hath visited men in so much mercy, why should my heart weep and my soul linger in the valley of sorrow, and my flesh waste away, and my strength slacken, because of the mine afflictions? . . .

Awake, my soul! No longer droop in sin. Rejoice, O my heart, and give place no more for the enemy of my soul. [2 Nephi 4:26, 28]

Paul, the indomitable missionary apostle of the New Testament, echoed the feelings of Nephi in acknowledging his own struggles against imperfections. Paul said,

For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I.

For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.

For I delight in the law of God after the inward man:

But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? [Romans 7:15, 19, 22–24]

Then Paul, of course, acknowledges the ultimate source of his hope and his strength, just as Nephi has done.

These acknowledgements of imperfection in the lives of those whom I admire and sustain as the Lord's servants does not cause me to lose faith and confidence in them nor in mankind. It only underlines the fact that we are all engaged in the same effort to make ourselves better and to approach increasingly the perfect model of the Savior. That effort, according to Joseph Smith, will be a continuing one:

It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave. [Teachings, p. 348]

I have learned that my own progress cannot always be represented by a sustained, constant upward curve. There are ups and downs. I observe this same phenomenon in the lives of those with whom I am well acquainted. The encouraging thing about this movement along the course of life is that in most instances the lows experienced in more recent times are generally higher on the curve toward perfection than some of the highs were in earlier years. Often the greatest challenge is to sustain the effort when some slippage has occurred. It is particularly difficult when we are inclined to measure our own weaknesses against the strengths of others.

The Determination Not to Succumb

One lesson life has taught me is that there is absolutely no value or benefit in being critical and judgmental of failings we observe in someone else's life. A sensitivity to our own weakness sometimes seems to create the temptation to note and underscore the imperfections we see in others. Through this process we sometimes try to justify and condone our own failings. It is a deceitful thing to do. It not only impedes our own progress, but it can be

hurtful to those whom we judge and often criticize before others.

I know that I must appeal not only to the mercy of God, through the redemption of his holy Son, but I must also rely upon the forgiveness and compassion of those who know me best and whose lives brush against mine.

Sometimes those whom I disappoint or offend are those who look to me for leadership and example, who must surely despair at times because of my failings.

I have learned, perhaps more at times when my own shortcomings are so evident, that it is not always the degree of observable progress that matters so much as the unyielding determination not to succumb finally and irrevocably to the "temptations and sins which do so easily beset me," to use Nephi's vernacular. I have come to believe that *enduring*, as the term is so frequently used in the scriptures, is as much related to an attitude or a state of mind as it is to a course of overt action. It is manifest in a determination never to yield in the struggle. It causes us to say to ourselves constantly: "I will not give in to my failings. Regardless of how often I lose my footing and slip backward on the path of progress, I will get up and I will move on. I will not quit. I will endure to the end that one day I will qualify for eternal life."

Incumbent in this determination is the absolute faith and confidence that through the infinite atonement of Jesus Christ and the mercies of God there is still hope for me. Nephi said,

Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life. [2 Nephi 31:20]

The Necessary Influence of the Spirit

Perhaps the most significant lesson of all that I have learned is that I cannot succeed in this struggle alone. I must have the love, compassion, support, and confidence of those who know me best. But most important, I must have the strength, the light, and the spiritual power that only come from a divine source. I must have this help to rise above the human frailties that I possess. Man cannot, by his own resources, even with the love and support of his fellow beings, rise above the limitations of human weakness and imperfection. He is lost if he tries to stand alone.

King Benjamin in the Book of Mormon understood this great truth when he said,

For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father. [Mosiah 3:19]

I don't believe that we are to understand from Benjamin's statement that mankind is evil by nature. The Savior himself has said, "Every spirit of man was innocent in the beginning: and God having redeemed man from the fall, men became again, in their infant state, innocent before God" (D&C 93:38).

The carnal state of man in mortal life comes as a result of man's individual transgressions. Moses made this clear in his description of the consequences that came to the children of Adam as they fell into disobedience after they had been taught the law of God. Moses explains:

And Satan came among them, saying: I am also a son of God; and he commanded them, saying:

Believe it not [that is, don't believe the law of God]; and they loved Satan more than God. And men began from that time forth to be carnal, sensual, and devilish. [Moses 5:13]

The fallen state that Benjamin describes for the natural man is one that man brings upon himself through disobedience. His only hope for rising above this state is through the sanctifying, purifying influence of the Spirit of God, which comes into one's life as a result of sincere repentance for sins that are committed and also the adoption of the nature described by Benjamin: submissive, meek, humble, patient, willing to submit to every test without faltering. It is then that the Spirit of God can work its lifting, refining influence in our lives, making spiritual progress possible. I have learned that without this influence we have no prospect of attaining to the perfections that our Eternal Father holds out as a challenge for all of his children.

It has seemed to me, after sixty years of experience in the mortal struggle, that the single greatest need I have is to nurture those qualities described by Benjamin. I know the Savior has done everything for me I cannot do for myself. I have absolute confidence that his infinite atonement will apply to me if I will endure in my effort to improve and to become more like him. My highest goal in life should be to incorporate into my own nature the qualities that he so perfectly exemplified in his life and ministry. In this way I respond to his invitation to come unto him. Not only will I then feel comfortable with being in his holy presence, but I will discover that I have become more like him and will therefore be more able to assist him in his work and in the blessing of my fellowmen.

How We Deal with Others

The Christ-like qualities we need to develop are best demonstrated in the way we relate to others. Perhaps I can illustrate to a

degree what I mean by sharing with you something that happened a year or so ago. Sister Larsen and I attended church meetings in the little Idaho town where Sister Larsen was born and where she lived during her girlhood years. During priesthood meeting I was participating in a discussion with the high priest group of the ward. The subject of the lesson being reviewed that morning had to do with honesty and integrity. The discussion had led us into a consideration of how honest, in strictly legalistic sense, may not always be adequate in our dealings with others. There were comments about the need for being fair and equitable also. The men in the group came mostly from farming backgrounds. Their sense of values was basic and unencumbered by some of the subtleties we are so often afflicted with.

To illustrate a point he was attempting to make, one of the men in the group said, "Let me tell you a story about Uncle Otto." I was immediately alert with interest. I knew the Uncle Otto referred to was my father-in-law. He had passed away more than ten years before. He was actually of no blood relationship to the man who was speaking. He had simply been known as Uncle Otto to some of those whose parents had associated closely with him and who had shared his way of life.

I must explain that my father-in-law had spent his life working a small farm. He had homesteaded part of the ground as a young man just at the turn of the century. In those early years horses were an essential ingredient in the success of the farmer. Living conditions were very stringent by our present standards. Having a good team had much to do with whether a year's work showed profit or a loss.

My father-in-law was a quiet man. He was not apt to say much about his inner feelings. He worked hard, and he loved the land he farmed. He was never called upon to carry responsibilities of notoriety in the Church or in the community. But everyone knew the principles upon which he stood. The only sermons

he ever preached were those that came unspoken from the way he lived.

Returning to the discussion in the priesthood group, the man continued with the story about Uncle Otto. He spoke of a long-term negotiation that had gone on between his father and my father-in-law over the possible trade of some horses. Such a transaction was entered into with greatest care because so much was at stake. This was especially the case in matching pairs of horses as teams. An agreement had finally been reached that appeared to be totally acceptable to both the farmers. The trade was made.

The man relating the story concluded in this way.

It was on the evening of the day the horse trading had taken place. We were sitting around our kitchen table, eating our evening meal. Father had been telling us how pleased he was with the trade he had made with Uncle Otto. Apparently he was totally satisfied with the outcome of the transaction. Suddenly there was a knock at our door, and father went to see who was calling us. It was Uncle Otto. He stood in the doorway to speak to my father, but we at the table could easily overhear the conversation.

"I've been thinking about the trade we made today," Uncle Otto said. "I haven't felt exactly right because I think I got a little the best of the deal."

His hand went into the pocket of his overalls and came out with a beautiful pocketknife that he obviously treasured.

"I've thought it over," Uncle Otto said, "and I'd feel a lot better if you'd take this knife."

The man who shared this story with us told how deeply he had been impressed, even as a boy, by this act of personal integrity that seemed to go beyond basic honesty.

Developing qualities of this kind helps us to move forward toward greater perfection.

How Can We Judge?

One of the things that has greatly concerned me over the years, and perhaps more so in recent times, is the proclivity some have for searching out and advertising imperfections in the lives of Church leaders, particularly those who have now passed on. I spend much of my time in direct association with the leadership of the Church on the general level and in the regions, stakes, and mission as well. It isn't difficult to observe the human qualities in all these people, but I am continually impressed by the great desire and determination they have to do what is right in God's eyes. Sometimes they may do it imperfectly, but I cannot feel that this gives others license to demean them or scorn them. I am generally conscious, when I am associating with these men and women, of a subtly witnessing spirit that they have the Lord's endorsement. I see them as fellow participants in the struggle toward greater excellence and more effectiveness in administering the Lord's work. Sometimes I see the anguish they experience when they know they could have done better. I know that feeling so well myself.

Once in a great while we see a leader betray the trust that is placed in him, but it is a comparatively rare thing. It is not difficult for me to sustain the ones I know best as the Lord's servants, even though I may not always find myself in total agreement with them, nor they with me.

The Lord gives a solemn warning to those who make a practice of castigating those whom he has chosen to guide his work.

Cursed are all those that shall lift up the heel against mine anointed, saith the Lord, and cry they have sinned when they have not sinned before me, saith the Lord, but have done that which was meet in mine eyes, and which I commanded them. [D&C 121:16]

It is so difficult to us to judge justly when we must judge from a position of imperfection ourselves.

I have permission from one of my daughters, Kristine Bicker, to share with you today an extract from some of her writings on this subject. Perhaps the spirit of it will convey a feeling to you that will be more meaningful than my own expressions would be. I quote from her writing:

The top drawer of my mother's desk is always untidy. It is filled with unimportant odds and ends that, by nature, accompany a busy life. As I sorted through the clutter I smiled to myself at the treasures this drawer has absorbed through the years. There were old sales slips from Auerbach's, yellow no.2 pencils—some without lead or erasers—a couple of bobby pins, a plastic straw with one end chewed flat, and a little red spiral notebook. The notebook fell open in my hand. The writing, tiny and crimped, looked unfamiliar, and I wondered who had filled these pages with such an unsure hand.

After reading a line or two I knew the mystery of the ledger. It had belonged to my late Grandmother Johnson. She had written in crisp, incomplete sentences about visiting some friends in Rexburg. There were a number of paragraphs about a trip to Europe with Uncle Harold. As I skimmed the pages I found some sketchy gardening tips copied from an old issue of Better Homes and Gardens and a recipe for zucchini-oatmeal bread—useless because there were several words I couldn't quite decipher. There was also a shopping list that read, "Two pairs of stockings, one good blouse, five pounds of flour, stamps at post office, twine to tie up roses."

Across from each entry was a corresponding price notation, and then subtractions and additions. The noting disclosed obviously that this particular list maker had been mindful of her expenditures and prudent.

I had not known this woman, my grandmother, very well. She brought ten spirits into the world—

my mother being next to the youngest. It followed then that by the time I was old enough to be aware of Grandma Johnson she was almost too old to be aware of me. I remembered only bits and pieces of experiences shared with her. Riding through the inky blackness of Yellowstone Park at night to get to Grandma's house and then being carried half-asleep up the steep sidewalk, past the profusion of rose bushes, to be put in bed with my sisters in the blue bedroom is one of my recollections.

My grandmother fed us peaches, homemade bread with preserves, and lots of soup. Kool-aid was a staple, sodas a luxury. She baked lots of spicy cookies, but hid them very carefully on the top shelf in one of her big china bowls lest we ruin our suppers. Her kitchen door had a very tight spring and always, always banged shut with a resonating smack, after which my grandmother always, always said, "Don't slam the kitchen door." (As if we could have prevented it from closing that way.)

In Grandma Johnson's house there was a painting of a forest fire that hung on a shadowy wall of the upstairs landing. The picture was dark and ominous, with brilliant, orange flames licking hungrily at the skeletons of black trees. It terrified all of us children. To keep from becoming too frightened, we ran past it without looking.

My grandmother liked to dress in pretty suits with soft, crepe blouses. She loved to wear hats. My sisters and I played with reckless abandon in the bandboxes full of hats on the floor of the closet in the blue bedroom. We would pose in pretty cameos in front of the vanity that had been my mother's when she was a little girl. After an hour or so, Grandma Johnson would call up the stairs: "You girls aren't in my hats, are you?" And we would call back down: "No, Grandma, we aren't in your hats." We knew she was too unsteady to climb up all those steep stairs to find us out.

One afternoon, however, without any warning, she appeared in righteous indignation at the bedroom door, catching us in a profusion of organza net and straw flowers. We didn't know how she climbed those stairs so quietly or gotten past that fire paint-

ing, but the joy went out of playing dress-up, and we didn't bother her hats again.

Grandmother Johnson had a passion for giving and getting pretty cards. She especially like the ones with cutout borders, artfully covered with sketches of flowers. We read and reread the verses inside that intimated thoughts about love and friendship. She kept those cards with messages special to her displayed for months on top of the desk and buffet in her dining room.

I caught myself smiling at these fragments of memories, and turned again to the page of the shopping list. In one corner I could make out faintly a date, and realized, after a moment or so, that she had composed a little budget during the semester for which she had paid the money owed for my tuition at college. She had also secured my student housing. I felt a twinge of uneasiness as I remembered how cavalier I had been about her generosity. I had experienced a degree of gratitude, but being young, I suppose, expected good things as a matter of course.

I wondered now, studying her ciphering, if perhaps my grandmother had passed up a special little hat, or neglected to put in a new rose hybrid because her spare dollars had been used to purchase my books. I regretted not telling her I was sorry about playing in her Sunday hats and for not catching the kitchen door fast enough. I hope I told her that I loved her because I just discovered how much she must have loved me.

I am grateful for that feeling deep inside that she isn't gone forever. I think there are many discoveries we will want to share. Perhaps she will remember the missing words in the zucchini-oatmeal bread recipe, and she can tell me how she got past so quietly that forest fire painting on the landing of her stairs to find us in her hats. [Kristine L. Bicker, *Memories of My Grandmother*, used by author's permission]

Taking the Challenge

I have some sensibility of the price that is paid regularly by those who are attempting to administer the Lord's work. But I am confident that I cannot begin to understand at my

present stage of development the love and willingness to sacrifice for the good of others that filled the soul of Joseph Smith, and certainly not that of the Savior of Mankind. But, perhaps through my continued experience, I will learn better and will one day be able to share my feelings more comfortably with them.

In summary, I have learned from living sixty years that imperfections are challenges all of us must deal with. We cannot overcome them nor their consequential effects in our lives without the Lord's help. We cannot permit

ourselves to be overcome by them, and there is absolutely no benefit to be gained by detecting and advertising those we see in the lives of others.

May the Lord help all of us to move purposefully forward along the path to a greater perfection with a deep sense of gratitude for the opportunities he provides us—challenging though they may be at times—to become more like him.

I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.