

*Paul and Alma and Harold B. Lee:
What Prophets and Common Sense Can Teach Us
About Learning From Our Mistakes*

REX E. LEE

Janet has announced a principle that is both straightforward and important. Over this coming school year, everyone of you is going to experience some disappointments and some setbacks. Some of them will be rather profound and laden with sorrow, but we can learn and grow from these sorrow-laden experiences if we will resolve to do so.

For my part, I propose to discuss two related propositions that I believe follow as corollaries to the basic premise that we can learn from our mistakes. But first, with regard to the basic principle, let me tell you of an experience in which I personally learned from a mistake.

The general lesson I learned from this mistake concerns the importance of preparation. More particularly, I learned that when you argue a case in the United States Supreme Court you can never prepare too much.

One of the customs in the Supreme Court is that lawyers arguing cases for the government always appear in formal attire called a morning suit, consisting of striped pants, a vest, and swallowtail coat. I bought such a suit from a fellow who left the solicitor general's office at about the time I joined it. He was nearly my size but a little bigger around

the middle. Following my first argument Janet told me she thought my argument was all right, but that my hair kept falling down in my eyes and my pants were baggy. She told me to bring the pants home so she could fix them.

My next argument a month later involved an important constitutional issue, citizen and taxpayer standing to bring constitutional challenges in federal courts. The morning of the argument, as I was changing into my government lawyer uniform, I tried to anticipate the questions that I might be asked. I remembered that Justice Harlan in a dissenting opinion in a case called *Flast v. Cohen* had suggested what he characterized as a possible Hohfeldian analysis that might be applicable to this citizen standing issue. I didn't remember precisely what he had said, and my first inclination was to reread that opinion before I went to the Court. But then I said to myself, "No, it's just an abstract theory in a dissenting opinion, no subsequent opinion has even acknowledged it, and the briefs don't discuss it. No one is going to ask me about it, and, besides, I need the

Rex E. Lee was president of Brigham Young University when he gave this devotional address on 14 September 1993.

extra time to apply some safety pins to my pants and comb my hair just right and then spray it." I had forgotten to take the pants home to Janet for alterations.

It was not until after my argument time had expired, and I was in the process of sitting down, that Justice Stevens said, "By the way, Mr. Solicitor General, what is your view of Justice Harlan's theory in *Flast v. Cohen* that there may be a Hohfeldian analysis applicable to the citizen standing issue?"

Well, if you read the transcript of my answer to that question, it will remind you of a high foul ball hit back behind home plate and out of play. The batter was not put out, but no runners advanced. Then, when I returned to my office, the first thing I did, of course, was to read Justice Harlan's opinion, something I should have done two hours earlier. You can imagine my dismay when I discovered that Justice Stevens' question was a home run ball, which I should have hit out of the park. But all was not lost. Three separate people came up to me after that argument and told me how nice my hair looked and how well my pants fit.

The first corollary that I would like to discuss with you is that we can learn not only from our mistakes but also from a willingness to attempt something at which we are not particularly skilled or experienced.

The experience of missionaries learning a new language is familiar to so many of us. One of the most valuable attributes for a new missionary or anyone else attempting to learn a second language is a simple willingness to do his or her best even when the inevitable consequence, at least for the first few months, will be a form of communication that ranges all the way from the incomprehensible to the embarrassing. One of my companions learned very quickly and very effectively the difference between the Spanish phrases *yo se* and *yo soy*. What he meant to say to our investigator family was, "Yo se que Jose Smith es un profeta de Dios." "I know that Joseph Smith is a prophet

of God." The words he in fact pronounced with great confidence were, "Yo soy Jose Smith, un profeta de Dios." After the cottage meeting I informed him that he had testified he was Joseph Smith. The members of the family that we were visiting were very impressed. Earlier in my mission I had made an even worse mistake when I attempted to apologize to a young woman for having embarrassed her. After the meeting my companion told me what I had in fact said, and I assure you I will never forget that the Spanish word for "embarrassed" is not *embarazada*, which means "pregnant."

About a month ago Janet and I visited in Santa Monica, California, with one of the most remarkable people we have ever met. Bill Hobson is not a member of the LDS Church but is very impressed by the Church and also by our university. He is in his eighties, and some time ago suffered a stroke that affected his speech so severely that his doctors said he would never be able to speak again. In fact, he can speak, and after visiting with him I think I know why. At one point he told us how highly he thought of our "college." He then added that he knew there was another word, more correct than *college* as applied to our school, but the other word was one he could not say.

When Janet responded, "Is the word *university*?" his entire countenance became radiant.

"Yes, that's it. I can't say the word, but that's it." Our newly found friend, Bill Hobson, is the perfect example of this first corollary to Janet's general principle about learning from our mistakes. He is able to communicate so effectively now in spite of his stroke because he has a willingness and desire to do so.

Whether a missionary struggling with a new language, or a Bill Hobson grappling with his own English language after his physical setback, we can learn not only from our mistakes, but also from activities that might carry the risk of mistakes. Both are wrapped up in the

same package with opportunities for learning, growth, and improvement.

My second corollary deals with a particular kind of mistake called transgression. In this context also we can learn from our errors. But the difference is that when the error fits in the category of transgression, we should not deliberately make mistakes—or even enter into circumstances or activities likely to lead to mistakes—because of opportunities to learn and grow from them. Consider, for example, the cases of Paul and Alma. We know them mainly because of their great spiritual strengths. They are even more memorable because of mistakes made before their miraculous turnarounds and because of the contrasts in their lives before and after those turnarounds.

I cannot think of any examples, either in scriptural or other history, of persons for whom the before and after disparity was as great. Nothing could be lower than the depths to which each had sunk during his extended mistake period, and nothing could be greater than the heights to which each rose after he discovered the mistake, learned from it, and changed his life to conform with what he had learned. Try to imagine—to recreate in your own mind—how each must have felt immediately after he was informed of his wrongdoing. How would you feel if you had received the devastatingly chastising question—either by the Savior himself as in Paul’s case, “Why persecutest thou me?”, or by an angel in Alma’s, “Why persecutest thou the church of God?” In both cases, the direct heavenly verbal scolding was accompanied by severe physical consequences. Paul was stricken blind for three days, and Alma lost the use of his mouth and his limbs for two days and two nights.

It is hard to say who must have felt worse—Alma because he knew that his mistake had affected not only his relationship with his Heavenly Father, but with his earthly father as well, or Paul because he had inflicted actual physical harm on those who believed in Christ.

Each knew that his transgression was so serious that heavenly intervention was warranted to stop it. What possible circumstance could be worse? What possible mistake could be more serious? Lesser persons would have simply given up. Not so with Paul and Alma. Both raised themselves up from those great depths to become among the most prominent figures in the Book of Mormon and the New Testament.

While it is true that Paul and Alma grew greatly as they learned from and corrected earlier mistakes, this surely does not mean that we should deliberately make the mistakes in the first place or put ourselves in mistake-laden opportunities. There will be adequate opportunities for unavoidable error and disappointment; we need not reach out affirmatively to create them. If we could talk to Paul and Alma, for example, they would surely tell us that their lives would have been better and happier if they had never faltered.

The same is true of the prodigal son. He is the dominant figure that emerges from the account in the fifteenth chapter of Luke. He deserves the notoriety that he gets because he learned from his mistake and apparently turned his life around. But I submit that the better role model, the one who chose the better course, and whom we should strive to emulate, is the prodigal son’s brother. By following his path rather than that of the prodigal son, we may not get front-page coverage, but we will save ourselves a lot of agony. And I am confident that if we could interview the prodigal son himself, he would agree. Eating corn husks is not all that great.

In conclusion I would like to return now to Janet’s fundamental principle, unadorned by corollaries, that we can learn from our mistakes. And, specifically, I would like to recount for you what I learned twenty years ago, almost to the day, from one of my great heroes and role models, Harold B. Lee. On September 11, 1973, following the last devotional address

he ever gave at this university and about three months before his untimely death, President Lee gathered together a group of BYU administrators and talked to us for about an hour regarding some of the principles of leadership he had learned over the course of his life. He did this by telling us about a dozen stories. The stories fascinated me, as did the conclusions he drew from them. It wasn't until a couple of days later that Elder Oaks, then president of the university, pointed out something I had not realized: Everyone of President Lee's stories revolved around a mistake he had made at some phase of his life. Let me tell you the one example I remember best.

As many of you may know, President Lee was a great admirer of President J. Reuben Clark. Prior to being called as a General Authority, Brother Lee served as managing director of the Church welfare program. On that day in 1973 when he spoke to the BYU administrators, he told us how frustrated he had become while serving in his welfare position because of a lack of cooperation by employees in another Church office. Shortly after his call as a member of the Council of the Twelve, he said to his mentor, President Clark, "Now that I am one of the Twelve, do you suppose I can get some response from those people in such and such an office?"

President Clark's response, as President Lee reported it that day, was, "Yes, my boy, now that you hold the whip hand, there is a great temptation to use it. But you must never do that."

For me that story bore a powerful message about respect for the use of power and the mistakes that can be made in its misuse. Perhaps even more important, the entire collection of stories that President Lee reviewed illustrate the powerful potential for the sons and daughters of God—be they prophets ancient or modern or visiting teachers or anyone else—to learn and grow and assist others to learn and grow from the mistakes that are the inevitable consequences of life on this planet.

We have before us a wonderful school year. It has the potential to be one of the best years of our lives. For many of you it will be. Inevitably it will be a year in which everyone of you will make some mistakes and suffer some disappointments and discouragements. For some of you, these will be large and overwhelming. For others, not so large. Will each of you resolve with me this morning that whether large or small, when those mistakes are made, when those setbacks occur, you will prove yourself to be greater than they, that you will weather the storm, take your lumps, shed your tears, even say a few "if onlys," if that helps, and then pick yourself up and ask, "Now what have I learned from this, and how can I come out of this particular windstorm a better and stronger person because I've had to go through it?" It is because I care for each of you that I want you to make this promise. And I, in turn, will give you a promise that you will come out of it a greater, wiser, and better person. I do so in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.