

The Thoughts of Our Hearts or Why Do We Do What We Do?

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Brothers and sisters, I need to start with a little confession. My wife, Ann, and I are tyrants. We want our three children to play the piano, and we stop just short of shackling their ankles to the bench to make sure that happens. The other night as we were driving home from an especially dismal piano lesson, I was haranguing my two sons over their sad performance and obvious lack of preparation. As soon as I took a breath, my 11-year-old seized the opportunity to adjust my thinking.

“Okay, Dad, I had a bad lesson tonight. But, do you know what? I don’t care.”

Where had he learned to express himself so clearly? My firstborn apparently possesses not an ounce of desire to excel at the piano, in spite of years of coaxing and persuasion from his parents. Can any of you relate? Does “You will thank me later for making you practice” sound familiar to you? Or “You will be grateful you learned to play the hymns when you hit the mission field.” Ever heard that?

I am counting on Adam’s heart softening toward the piano as he matures, because he is actually quite talented. I have the feeling that he will go through the same cycle of change that I did, eventually developing a very personal, internal desire to master the piano for the love of music and what it does for his soul.

But, for now, my wife and I accept the fact that he will need steady external motivation if we expect to see any progress. Adam will practice the piano because we force him to.

I wonder why you do the things you do. Why did you practice the piano? Why did you quit practicing the piano? Why do you wear your hair that way? Why are you in college? Why are you dating that particular girl?

As a freshman at BYU, I remember going to bed that first Saturday night in my ultracompact Helaman Halls room and realizing that I could decide whether or not to get up for nine o’clock church the next morning. Mom and Dad were in California and would have no idea whether I went or not.

The decision to get up on Sunday morning was strictly up to me, dictated by the internal desires of my heart. It is really the same with every choice we make. People around us see the choice itself, but only we know why we made that choice. In contrast to our childhood years, when many of our choices were made with little thought or were based on some

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external motivator—such as our parents or teachers or maybe a best friend—the more mature and independent we become, the more personal responsibility we have for our choices and the more those choices are governed by the motives that lie within our own hearts. Although external forces will always lean on our behavior, they become more and more subservient to the personal, heartfelt desires we carry inside of us.

President James E. Faust explained:

We must at times search our own souls and discover what we really are. Our real character, much as we would wish, cannot be hidden. It shines from within us transparently. Attempts to deceive others only deceive ourselves. [James E. Faust, “Search Me, O God, and Know My Heart,” *Ensign*, May 1998, 18]

Years ago I heard Boyd K. Packer invite us to listen to our hearts. That expression turned on a light for me. He didn’t speak of feeling the impulses of our hearts but of *listening* to our hearts—as if this central organ of our body that is somehow able to bridge the temporal and the spiritual about us could actually speak to us.

When warned by the Lamanites that if they prayed they would suffer death, “Alma and his people did not raise their voices to the Lord their God, but did pour out their hearts to him; and he did know the thoughts of their hearts” (Mosiah 24:12).

Even Grandmother Willow understood this important truth when she told Pocahontas to listen to her heart in the Disney movie.

So what are the thoughts of your heart? What do you hear whispered to your mind each time you make a choice? Why do you do what you do? For the next few minutes, let’s each of us peel away our protective shells and take that “fantastic voyage” inside—directly to our hearts—and admit to ourselves what makes us tick.

If I were to poll you all right now and ask why you went to church last Sunday, and if

you answered from quietly inside yourself where no one else could see you or hear you, I suspect we would uncover a colorful array of answers reflecting the true “thoughts and intents” within each of our hearts (Mosiah 5:13). You may say: “Habit.” “Spiritual refreshment.” “Duty.” “Social outlet.” “Peer pressure.” “Obedience.” These honest expressions of the heart are the underlying explanations for our actions. Hearing them clearly helps us understand our choices better. We are probably more comfortable with some of the thoughts of our hearts than we are with others. What’s important is to understand them and to know that we can change them if we choose.

Our family has been slowly working our way together through the Book of Mormon. (We read right after the piano practicing is finished.) Right now we are firmly entrenched in the life-and-death struggles of the battlefield reported in the book of Alma. In the course of narrating one particular battle, the author-prophet took time to describe for us the reasons that each side had gone to war. I can’t help but feel that the Lord offers this description so that we can learn something fundamental about ourselves.

Zerahemnah is captain of the Lamanite army and shrewdly plays upon the desires of the Amalekite subculture—described as being “of a more wicked and murderous disposition than the Lamanites were” (Alma 43:6). He appointed the Amalekites to be his chief captains so that “he might preserve their hatred towards the Nephites” (Alma 43:7). Zerahemnah’s driving desire is to enslave the Nephites, and he knows that he must appeal to his people’s driving desires to succeed. And why was this army of Lamanites willing to go to battle against the Nephites? The scriptures report it was so they “might usurp great power over them, and also that [they] might gain power over the Nephites by bringing them into bondage” (Alma 43:8).

But the Nephites were going to battle for entirely different reasons. We read:

The Nephites were inspired by a better cause, for they were not fighting for monarchy nor power but they were fighting for their homes and their liberties, their wives and their children, and their all, yea, for their rites of worship and their church.

And they were doing that which they felt was the duty which they owed to their God.
[Alma 43:45–46]

As the battle progressed, the Nephites found themselves on the brink of defeat. At that point Captain Moroni “sent forth and inspired their hearts,” as the scriptures say (Alma 43:48). He renewed their commitment to the reasons that brought them to battle in the first place. And with those thoughts and intents reaffirmed in their hearts, the Nephites “cried with one voice unto the Lord their God” and “began to stand against the Lamanites with power” (Alma 43:49–50). In dramatic fashion the much larger Lamanite army wilted against the Nephites. They began to flee, only to be “encircled about by the Nephites,” causing these power-hungry aggressors to be “struck with terror” (Alma 43:53).

Notice two significant themes from this military exchange. First, our motives for doing things matter. Second, there are better and worse motives to choose from. And the better motives give us access to divine help.

Both the Lamanites and Nephites were doing the same thing on the surface—they were both at war. But they were doing it for vastly different reasons. “The Nephites were inspired by a better cause” (Alma 43:45)—a cause that they knew was acceptable to God. Their reasons were aligned with God’s will and qualified them to rely upon Him for support. The scriptures are careful to report that “in that selfsame hour that they cried unto the Lord for their freedom,” the tide of the battle turned (Alma 43:50). And thus they conquered.

Neal A. Maxwell brings the significance of our motives into clearer focus:

Actually, everything depends—initially and finally—on our desires. These shape our thought patterns. Our desires thus precede our deeds and lie at the very cores of our souls, tilting us toward or away from God (see D&C 4:3). God can “educate our desires” (see Joseph F. Smith, Gospel Doctrine, 5th ed., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1939, p. 297). Others seek to manipulate our desires. But it is we who form the desires, the “thoughts and intents of [our] hearts” (Mosiah 5:13).

*The end rule is “according to [our] desires . . . shall it be done unto [us]” (D&C 11:17), “for I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts” (D&C 137:9; see also Alma 41:5; D&C 6:20, 27). One’s individual will thus remains uniquely his. God will not override it nor overwhelm it. Hence we’d better want the consequences of what we want! [Neal A. Maxwell, “Swallowed Up in the Will of the Father,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 23]*

So then, why did you go to church on Sunday? Why did you sing the hymns? Why did you partake of the sacrament? Why did you bow your heads in communal prayer? This is a very personal process, this process of inspecting and understanding the thoughts of our hearts. It is difficult to talk about because the subject is so dear and the stakes are so high. Sometimes we are lucky enough to have a family member or a friend or a priesthood leader who helps us unravel the mystery that underlies our choices. But in the end, it is up to each one of us—together with God—to honestly take inventory of the thoughts of our hearts. Remember the Lord’s instruction to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery: “There is none else save God that knowest thy thoughts and the intents of thy heart” (D&C 6:16).

In exploring my own motives, I find they fall across a broad spectrum, bordered on one end by “Love of the World” and on the other end by “Love of God.” From that quiet place inside your heart, see if you don’t agree. Finding validation and reinforcement from the world

immediately around us sometimes seems the most intuitive to us because it is so tangible and so neatly measured by our peers, our coworkers, and our social role models. It is the natural course for the natural man. If being accepted of man is the thought and intent of our heart, we are driven by fashion, winning, our bodies, money, and power. We may well achieve the acceptance we are looking for, but, like the world around us, our satisfaction is built upon sand and soon washes out with the tide. Our bodies get flabby, our possessions decay, someone smarter or younger or more attractive replaces us, and we are left with nothing of lasting value. The Lord cautions us repeatedly about going “on in the persuasions of men” and fearing “man more than God” (D&C 3:6; D&C 3:7).

William Wordsworth paints the bleak picture of marching to this drum:

*The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!*
[William Wordsworth, “The World Is Too Much with Us,” 1807, lines 1–4]

I am able to tell if my motives tend toward this end of the spectrum if I am primarily worried about me—because, ultimately, chasing after worldliness is to follow a path of systematic selfishness. President Spencer W. Kimball warned, “First, we must eliminate the individual tendency to selfishness that snares the soul, shrinks the heart, and darkens the mind” (Spencer W. Kimball, “Becoming the Pure in Heart,” *Ensign*, March 1985, 5). Selfishly pursuing “the honors of men” shrinks our hearts and removes us from God (D&C 121:35).

Now, just as the natural man within us is magnetized to love-of-the-world-type motivations, our divine nature embraces motives that are compatible with divine attributes. At this end of the spectrum we are driven to act according

to God’s will and with a desire to serve Him above all others—because we love Him and we love all that He loves. Instead of being influenced by the voices of men, we take “the Holy Spirit for [our] guide,” worrying only about listening closely and intently to His direction in spite of the noisy world around us (D&C 45:57). The love of God motivates us to seek riches “for the intent to do good—to clothe the naked, and to feed the hungry, and to liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and the afflicted” (Jacob 2:19).

Listen to the words of our living prophet:

There is something of divinity within each of you. You have such tremendous potential with that quality as a part of your inherited nature. Every one of you was endowed by your Father in Heaven with a tremendous capacity to do good in the world. . . .
. . . Try a little harder to measure up to the divine within each of you. As Alma said, “Awake and arouse your faculties” (Alma 32:27). [Gordon B. Hinckley “The Light Within You,” *Ensign*, May 1995, 99]

Personal motives at this end of the spectrum are focused on everyone except me. There is no time and honestly no interest in worrying about our own gold medal when it feels so good to help someone else to the platform. We embrace the ideal described by the Lord: “Every man seeking the interest of his neighbor, and doing all things with an eye single to the glory of God” (D&C 82:19).

What are your hearts thinking right now? Are the desires of your heart also spread across the horizon? Do they motivate you to choices that bring lasting happiness? Are you satisfied with what makes you tick? I hope that, like me, you would love to change your scattergram of motives for a more clustered group around “Love of God.” I am sure you recognize that the peace and joy that accompany the choices arising from these motives are much more appealing than the counterfeit pleasures that come from the others.

I can't count the times I have put my foot in my mouth with an insensitive comment and afterward asked myself, "Why did I say that?" When I was younger, the honest answer was that I was trying to be funny. I was looking for a laugh. Over time I have mostly gotten past that need to be the favorite entertainer, and now I more often possess better motives. Sometimes I will act on these improved motives and everything will work out great. But other times, even though my motive may be to smooth out a sensitive situation or to make someone else feel comfortable, I will inadvertently say the wrong thing and still offend. However, the feeling about the second foot-in-mouth experience is entirely different from the first. I still regret the offense, but I feel the peace in my heart that tells me loving, godly motives were at work, and, in short order, the unintended offense is miraculously replaced with understanding and love—all because the governing motives were more pure.

As our lives progress, we become increasingly conflicted as we alternate across the spectrum of motives. For a variety of reasons, with experience we find ourselves drawn more to one end than the other, and when we choose based on the "other" end, we are unhappy or uncomfortable. The Savior's words make perfect sense: "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other" (Matthew 6:24). With the Lord's help we can educate the desires of our hearts—as Elder Maxwell suggested—eventually resolving the dissonance and ensuring progress toward peace and freedom. At times the choice itself may look exactly the same, but our reasons for doing it may be quite different. Just like the Nephites who were forced to defend their liberties, we learn to be motivated by just the same sort of "better cause[s]."

So, how do we do it? How do we have the thoughts of our hearts more regularly speaking the love of God?

After years of wandering about, led by love-of-the-world desires and doing all he could to demonstrate his distaste for God, Alma the Younger experienced a remarkable change of heart. As a result of his experience, he told us:

Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters; And thus they become new creatures. [Mosiah 27:25–26]

Apparently it is not just the outwardly wicked among us who must undergo this change. It is all of us. Spiritual rebirth is the Lord's way of subduing the natural-man motivations of our hearts and giving life to the divine-nature motivations. In a very real sense spiritual rebirth is the sweetest coming-home experience we can have. It's the process by which we awaken to the meaning of the piano's music—and the process that makes temple marriage an eternal blessing rather than just a cultural norm. It is, I believe, the education of the heart that Elder Maxwell spoke of.

But we have got to be persistent and patient, remembering how fundamental eternal progress is to gospel living. For most of us, our spiritual rebirth is not the kind of dramatic event it was for Alma. It is probably more of an awakening that occurs over a long period of time and preparation—line upon line, in barely perceptible increments. In practical terms it means living the gospel more perfectly each day. It means doing a lot of things because the people we trust encourage us to. We will use them as the motivators of our choices for a season. I will count on my mother to enforce my piano practicing. And I will pay attention when my wife points out that the joke wasn't funny at all. And I will embrace my dad when he invites me to lean on his testimony until I have discovered

one of my own. It also means that sometimes we will do the right thing for the wrong reasons. I'm thinking it is better to be in church to see our friends than not to be in church at all and that praying out of habit at least gets us in the right posture to converse with God. As we practice doing the right things—even if for the wrong reasons or because we are simply responding to the pressure from those we love and trust—rebirth commences and the Lord is able to educate our desires. Before long our personal motives grow up to meet our actions, and we realize how unmotivated we are by desires that were previously so compelling.

Above all, we need to know the love that God has for us before we can muster the faith to let go of the familiar reinforcement the world offers. In truth, it is His love for us that allows the purifying rebirth to occur. John reminds us that “we love him, because he first loved us,” and we recognize that the prime demonstration of His love is the gift of His Son (1 John 4:19; see also John 3:16). In his powerful description of charity, Mormon admonished us to “pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love” (Moroni 7:48). Ask for it, he says. Make sure that part of your effort to change is to ask for the love of God. And then, if you do?

Ye may become the sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure. [Moroni 7:48]

My testimony to you, brothers and sisters, is that as our hearts change and become more pure, attraction to the world fades and we

wonder why we ever possessed such hollow desires. We become happier, more giving, more at peace. We have all sighed with relief to see the transformation of old Ebenezer Scrooge. We have felt the burning in our souls as we have read of the conversions of King Lamoni and the Apostle Paul. And we have watched in wonder as family and friends all around us today have undergone the subtle purification of spiritual rebirth. These are people who have honestly faced the thoughts of their hearts and have chosen to change them.

As we come home to the divine within us, we must do as the children of Israel in the last days: We must exchange stony hearts for soft hearts (see Ezekiel 11:19). We must exchange shrunken hearts for expanding hearts. We must exchange spotted hearts for pure hearts. If we can manage this exchange called rebirth and be attuned to the Holy Spirit, we will clearly hear the thoughts of our hearts urging us to love God, and we will make corresponding choices. Those choices will ultimately lead us to God, who has promised us immortality and eternal life.

The reasons behind our choices matter. And each of us individually is in charge of determining what those reasons are. May we all have the courage to allow the love of God to govern the thoughts and desires of our hearts and embark upon the path of spiritual rebirth that makes it possible. The rewards are more glorious than we can even comprehend.

“Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

I so witness in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.