

# Revealing Questions

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We are only about two weeks into the beginning of the spring term here on campus. Many of you are current students, and those of you who have completed this period of your life no doubt remember what it is like to walk into a fresh, new classroom. At the beginning of the semester or term, the gap between what you know now and what you need to know to do well in the course is often large—perhaps overwhelming. A university education requires that you learn about many different subjects, some of which will come naturally to you and some of which you will never quite feel confident about. Some subjects will be exciting and engaging and others you will vow never to willingly revisit.

Regardless of the subject, you know from the beginning that success will require you to work—usually to work hard. You will have an instructor to guide you in your journey, and she will provide you with things to read, assignments that make you think, and exams that allow you to prove yourself. You may have teaching assistants who can help you, and, of course, you have the assistance of the instructor.

## Learning in Mortality

This model of classroom learning is one that also applies to our mortal life. Elder Robert D. Hales taught, “The purpose of our life on earth is

to grow, develop, and be strengthened through our own experiences.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the purpose of learning in the classroom is to grow in knowledge, develop skills, and be strengthened in our understanding as we work diligently to acquire new knowledge and abilities. In Abraham 3:25 we read, “And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them.”

Just as you must eventually submit to examinations or other assessments to prove your learning in a classroom, we must submit to repeated tests and challenges in our earthly life. These trials allow us to prove that we are progressing in our mortal journey, and they may be particularly intense periods of growth. Just as students ramp up their efforts to study when an exam is looming, the experience of a spiritual test can heighten our own efforts to learn from the Lord.

To fulfill the purpose of learning and gaining experience, it was essential that, as we were born onto the earth, we passed through a veil. In so doing, we came to earth having forgotten all that had occurred before. This is perhaps one of the most challenging things about our lives.

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Because we are now restricted by mortal eyes, there is much about the eternal perspective and the purposes and timing of God that we do not understand. In the same way, as we approach a new subject in a classroom, the instructor has a broader perspective, being able to see how all of the material fits together and how it connects to other fields of knowledge in a way we usually cannot see—at least in the beginning.

### **Ignaz Semmelweis**

The story of Ignaz Semmelweis illustrates some concepts about questions, learning, and answers. I assume that this story is familiar to many of you. As a woman and an epidemiologist, I count Dr. Semmelweis among my heroes.

In 1847 Dr. Semmelweis, a Hungarian physician, was working as the chief resident in an Austrian medical clinic. There are many versions of the story, in which the details vary, but the crux of the story is that Dr. Semmelweis observed that approximately 10 percent of women who delivered their babies in his clinic, known as “the first clinic,” died from childbed fever. We now know that childbed fever is an infection of the female reproductive organs caused by strep bacteria. However, in the mid-1800s the cause of childbed fever was a mystery.

Dr. Semmelweis was first alerted to the potential ability to reduce deaths from childbed fever when he observed that the second maternity clinic, staffed primarily by midwives, had a much lower rate of childbed fever deaths—about 4 percent. More shocking, even women giving birth in the streets of Vienna were less likely to contract childbed fever.

Dr. Semmelweis undertook a rigorous study of the differences between the two clinics and for many months could not isolate a potential cause. The breakthrough occurred through tragedy. A friend and fellow physician at the clinic named Jakob Kolletschka was participating with students in a postmortem examination. During the exam Jakob was accidentally cut with a scalpel. Within a few days he was dead, having died from a disease that produced the same signs and symptoms and

seemed to follow the same natural course as childbed fever.

Following this tragedy, Dr. Semmelweis theorized that something from the cadaver was being carried on the physician’s hands to the maternity ward, and he proposed that the physicians should begin washing their hands with a chlorinated lime solution. This would be similar to a modern-day bleach solution. Although he was met with much resistance from the hospital staff, he enacted a policy, and as a result of the policy, a miraculous decline in childbed fever deaths occurred, dropping nearly 90 percent in a few weeks.

Despite the astounding evidence that this simple act of handwashing could save the lives of so many women, Dr. Semmelweis’s theory was rejected by his peers. In 1847, when Dr. Semmelweis undertook his investigations of childbed fever, most people in the world believed that disease was caused by a miasma—specifically, that rotting organic matter polluted the air and that this polluted air spread disease. His findings fully contradicted the prevailing model of disease causation, which meant that he could neither explain why a physician going from a postmortem exam to the maternity ward could transmit childbed fever; nor could he explain why handwashing reduced the rate of disease. Dr. Semmelweis had proven with his experiment that handwashing worked, but because he lacked the explanatory details, he could not convince his peers to trust him or the data. The other physicians simply felt that handwashing was too difficult and too time consuming. They certainly were not about to change their practice without a complete explanation.

The germ theory of disease, which would provide a rationale for handwashing, would not become widely accepted until after 1880. Dr. Semmelweis died in 1865 and would not live to see the scientific confirmation of his theory. Although he would die without seeing his work validated or adopted, Dr. Semmelweis never questioned what the data had shown him and never abandoned his efforts to persuade others to adopt handwashing.

### Imperfect Knowledge and Revelation

Perhaps the saddest part of Dr. Semmelweis's story is to consider the number of women who died and the number of children who grew up without their mothers due to the unwillingness of Dr. Semmelweis's contemporaries to accept a truth they could not explain. Spiritual knowledge may operate the same way. When we receive confirmation of truth through personal revelation, we may be met with opposition from our contemporaries because we cannot explain how or why something is. Just as Dr. Semmelweis had to trust his experience, we must trust our experience of revelation and trust in God as we wait for more to be revealed.

Our scientific understanding has grown by leaps and bounds since the days of Dr. Semmelweis, but there is still more scientific truth to be discovered. Some of you are currently participating in research that is expanding our understanding. Similarly, our understanding of spiritual truths has grown exponentially since the day when Joseph Smith knelt in the Sacred Grove. Yet, despite all that has been revealed, we know there is still more. The ninth article of faith says:

*We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.*

We believe He will yet reveal many great and important things. This promise of pending revelation tells us that the process of revelation is ongoing and that things we do not yet know will someday be known.

Personal revelation is the ongoing and lifelong process of thinning the veil that separates us from our Father in Heaven. Revelation increases our capacity to understand spiritual things and expands our knowledge. Because our Father in Heaven wants us to succeed, He has provided for us the scriptures and the teachings of the prophets to help us. We have peers, teachers, and Church leaders with whom we can discuss these materials. We have a living prophet, the gift of the Holy

Ghost, and, most important, access to our Father in Heaven through prayer. Just like learning in a classroom, success in acquiring spiritual knowledge will require diligent and effortful work.

### Questions and Uncertainty

As we strive to expand our spiritual knowledge, questions about policies, procedures, or principles come to us all. Elder Hales wrote, "As we grow in the gospel, it is natural to have questions and sometimes even doubts. Genuine questions can actually fuel our spiritual growth."<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Semmelweis made an observation, and this observation concerned him. His scientific discovery occurred in the way that many do: he saw something he could not explain and he asked a question. This question eventually led to an answer. Spiritual discovery, or revelation, also begins this way. We observe or encounter something we do not understand and we begin to ask questions. Questions can serve as a starting point for receiving personal revelation.

Gospel questions may also arise from the influence of competing voices. Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf stated:

*Never in the history of the world have we had easier access to more information—some of it true, some of it false, and much of it partially true.*

*Consequently, never in the history of the world has it been more important to learn how to correctly discern between truth and error.<sup>3</sup>*

In one of his most recent general conference addresses, President Russell M. Nelson taught:

*If we are to have any hope of sifting through the myriad of voices and the philosophies of men that attack truth, we must learn to receive revelation.<sup>4</sup>*

When we have concerns or questions about the gospel, seeking revelation on the subject should be our most important objective.

Questions—particularly questions that arise about the gospel—can be especially trying. Questions are inherently born of uncertainty,

and we as humans are vehemently opposed to uncertainty. We dislike the feeling of not knowing because we feel vulnerable. Yet this vulnerability can actually be a sacred space.

I have been learning an important lesson about living with uncertainty and vulnerability over the past several years. When my parents divorced thirteen years ago, I experienced an earth-shattering shift in my faith. Although I was already an adult, this shift in the structure of my family was difficult. Suddenly nothing seemed like it was quite right anymore. Prior to the divorce, I was already in a pretty fragile place emotionally and spiritually. I had graduated from college and was working on my master's degree, but I did not yet feel settled. I felt like I was existing in some no-man's-land. I felt lost and unsure of what I should do. The divorce amplified that feeling, as the family structure I was accustomed to had disappeared. This was a significant trial in my life, and throughout this experience I began to question my faith.

In particular, I struggled significantly with testimony meetings. I would listen to the testimonies of others, and almost without exception they contained the phrase "I know": "I know that God lives," "I know the Book of Mormon is true"—I know, I know, I know. But the problem was that I didn't know. I believed in God, I believed the Book of Mormon was scripture, I believed that Jesus died for me, and I believed in prophets, but I could not say with confidence that I knew—at least not the way that it seemed everyone else could. I was deep in the grasp of uncertainty.

I honestly believe that some people, maybe even lots of people, have received personal knowledge of the things they bear testimony of. But for me, this knowledge did not come. I have had a handful of powerful revelatory experiences in my life, and because of this I knew that God was aware of me and that He was guiding my life. But this seemed so much less than the confident testimonies I heard from others.

I went through a period of years feeling uncomfortable at church, feeling that I didn't belong. There were periods when it really felt so much easier to be anywhere but church. During

this period I was blessed with good friends and supportive family who helped me navigate. It didn't happen right away, but over time I came to the conclusion that the only way to manage this uncertainty was to walk through it. So I began to explore and to study. I opened the scriptures and I read the words of the prophets, but I also read other good books on religious topics. I began to have whispered conversations in safe spaces where I could express my uncertainty. Through my study and conversations, I learned that my experience was more common than rare.

During this period I encountered the following scripture in Alma 32:16–18, which reads:

*Therefore, blessed are they who humble themselves without being compelled to be humble; or rather, in other words, **blessed is he that believeth in the word of God, and is baptized without stubbornness of heart, yea, without being brought to know the word, or even compelled to know, before they will believe.***

*Yea, there are many who do say: If thou wilt show unto us a sign from heaven, then we shall know of a surety; then we shall believe.*

*Now I ask, is this faith? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; for **if a man knoweth a thing he hath no cause to believe, for he knoweth it.** [Emphasis added]*

I grew up in the Church; I attended four years of early-morning seminary and four years of religion classes at BYU. I could recite to you this and other definitions of faith, but before this time I had not separated belief and faith as being different from a sure knowledge. This scripture witnessed to me that it was absolutely okay to be unsure and still choose to believe. This was the essence of faith.

Later in my journey I was introduced to Doctrine and Covenants 46:14: "To [some] it is given to *believe* on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful" (emphasis added). I was familiar with this section, but somehow I had always missed this. To *believe* is a spiritual gift—just as is knowledge gained through the Holy Ghost, mentioned in verse 13 of the same section.

When I began this account, I said I was learning a lesson about living with uncertainty and vulnerability. Over the last five years or so, I have become increasingly comfortable with exercising faith in uncertainty. But this is still a process. I am learning that these feelings of vulnerability, though uncomfortable, help me to be more in touch with the Spirit, and as I continue to walk through this vulnerability, I am growing closer to my Savior.

### **Answers to Questions Come Through Personal Revelation**

The answers to our questions will come to us through personal revelation. As children of God, we have the privilege of seeking revelation to direct us in our growth and decision-making. Elder Uchtdorf taught:

*Latter-day Saints are not asked to blindly accept everything they hear. We are encouraged to think and discover truth for ourselves. We are expected to ponder, to search, to evaluate, and thereby to come to a personal knowledge of the truth.*<sup>5</sup>

Just as I expect my students to read, to study, and to participate in class as they seek understanding of the course material, our Heavenly Father expects us to read, to study, and to practice faith as we seek revelation.

Learning to receive personal revelation is a process of preparation and consistent effort. Sister Julie B. Beck stated, “The ability to qualify for, receive, and act on personal revelation is the single most important skill that can be acquired in this life.”<sup>6</sup> One of the reasons I love this quote is that Sister Beck talks about personal revelation as a skill. Like all skills, practice improves performance.

President Nelson has taught us how to begin developing this skill:

*Find a quiet place where you can regularly go. Humble yourself before God. Pour out your heart to your Heavenly Father. Turn to Him for answers and for comfort.*

*Pray in the name of Jesus Christ about your concerns, your fears, your weaknesses—yes, the very longings of your heart. And then listen! Write the thoughts that come to your mind. Record your feelings and follow through with actions that you are prompted to take. As you repeat this process day after day, month after month, year after year, you will “grow into the principle of revelation.”<sup>7</sup>*

### **Answers Will Come in the Lord’s Time**

Even with our best efforts, not all questions will be answered quickly, and some questions may not be fully answered until we have again passed through the veil. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland once stated, “Some blessings come soon, some come late, and some don’t come until heaven; but for those who embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ, they come.”<sup>8</sup> I believe that we can apply this idea to our search for answers: Some answers come soon, some come late, and some don’t come until heaven; but for those who embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ, they come.

Sometimes when a student asks a question in class, the complete answer is too complicated to be given at that time. Perhaps we have not yet covered the necessary background information for the answer to be understandable. Perhaps the answer would take us far beyond the scope of the course. In such situations, I often must ask my students to trust me.

This is similar to the experience a parent might have when a toddler enquires about the necessity of green beans. A toddler does not yet have the developmental capacity to understand the whole answer to the question of why we need to eat green beans. So a parent asks a child to trust them and perhaps gives part of the answer: “Green beans help our bodies grow healthy and strong.” It is not the entire story, but it is enough for now. As the child grows and develops, a more complete explanation can be given.

Answers to our spiritual questions may come in similar fashion. It is my experience that when I am wrestling with a question, the answers may come “here a little and there a little.”<sup>9</sup> I believe one of the reasons for this is that I have not yet acquired

all of the background knowledge or achieved the state of spiritual development in which I am capable of receiving and understanding the complete answer. It may also be that waiting for a response is an important part of the learning process. In my situation, had the Lord immediately responded to my questions with sure knowledge, I would not be learning the value of walking in faith.

At other times, answers or guidance are slow in coming at all. Elder Hales stated:

*We may not know when or how the Lord's answers will be given, but in His time and His way, I testify, His answers will come. For some answers we may have to wait until the hereafter. This may be true for some promises in our patriarchal blessings and for some blessings for family members. Let us not give up on the Lord. His blessings are eternal, not temporary.*<sup>10</sup>

In situations where it seems an answer is being withheld, our Father in Heaven is asking us to trust Him, to hang on a little longer, to be faithful, to be patient—to wait.

The scriptures issue the invitation to wait upon the Lord. I have generally thought about waiting as an idle activity. When I am waiting in a line at the grocery store or waiting for something to occur, I will admit that I am likely to be wasting my time. I might be browsing Facebook or scrolling through the news. However, we must never think about waiting on the Lord as an idle activity. Elder Hales stated:

*What, then, does it mean to wait upon the Lord? In the scriptures, the word wait means to hope, to anticipate, and to trust. To hope and trust in the Lord requires faith, patience, humility, meekness, long-suffering, keeping the commandments, and enduring to the end.*

*To wait upon the Lord means planting the seed of faith and nourishing it "with great diligence, and . . . patience."*<sup>11</sup>

When we wait upon the Lord, we should be actively engaged in keeping the commandments and surrounding ourselves with the Spirit.

In the period leading up to the First Vision, Joseph Smith was surrounded by a religious fervor. At this particular time in history, there was a revival happening among Christian denominations. As these various denominations debated their relative values, divisions between the people grew. I imagine that this scene was probably not that different from what we see happening in our world today. Although today's divisions are as likely to be caused by political or social debate as they are by religious debate, we also see a great division among the people.

This part of the story is well known to most members of the Church. Joseph, being a serious young man, set about reading the scriptures. In his words, "While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James."<sup>12</sup>

You can probably recite the second part of the scripture from memory, but I want to pause a second to examine what we know from this small section. I do not know how much time had passed since Joseph's initial exposure to these different religious sects until the day he was reading in James. But given that he said he "was laboring under . . . extreme difficulties," I imagine that his struggle to understand and his search for direction likely persisted for several weeks or perhaps months.

We sometimes make the mistake of thinking that Joseph received a near-immediate response to his inquiry, but carefully evaluating this scripture suggests that the vision itself came only after some period of pondering and studying the scriptures. A couple of verses later, Joseph wrote, "At length I came to the conclusion."<sup>13</sup> This is another indication that even stumbling upon this scripture in James did not result in an immediate understanding of how to act. Rather it suggests that Joseph spent some time—perhaps hours or even days—pondering how to apply this scripture.

Although the Lord may sometimes ask us to trust Him and to wait upon Him, Elder Uchtdorf taught:

*The invitation to trust the Lord does not relieve us from the responsibility to know for ourselves. This is more than an opportunity; it is an obligation—and it is one of the reasons we were sent to this earth.*<sup>14</sup>

Questions may be a natural consequence of spiritual growth, but we have a duty to do what is within our power to answer them.

### **Always Remember**

The opportunity for further revelation is enhanced when we humbly remember the witnesses of the Spirit that we have already received. In the sacrament prayers we witness that we will “always remember him.”<sup>15</sup> Without doubt we are promising to remember the beautiful sacrifice of our beloved Savior, but I believe we should also strive to always remember the tender confirmations of the Spirit.

Earlier we discussed that the purpose of our life on earth is to grow, develop, and be strengthened through experiences. Although our Heavenly Father intends for us to be happy and find joy, it is often true that our periods of significant growth will be accompanied by hard things. Spiritual strength is built in much the same way that physical strength is built: through adversity.

Three years ago I decided that it was time for me to establish an exercise routine. Although I had participated in cardiovascular exercise on and off my entire life, I had never seriously pursued strength training. With the help of my very patient personal trainer over the course of three years, I have developed some serious muscles and my endurance has improved. Although I can recognize now the physical strength I have gained, getting up for a 5:00 a.m. gym appointment is terrible every single time. I complain a lot during my workouts, and I have been known to attempt to negotiate with my trainer. Perhaps I have not yet learned to endure adversity well.

Adversity, like 4:30 a.m. wake-up calls and deadlifts, can reduce my ability to remember how grateful I am for my stronger, healthier body. Similarly, challenging circumstances in our lives and trials of faith can diminish our remembrance

of previously revealed truth. Adversity comes to us all—even the most righteous among us. We must be careful not to allow adversity to erase our memory of spiritual experiences.

While I was a student here at BYU nearly twenty years ago, Elder Holland gave what was for me a life-changing devotional address. It was an address that struck me so powerfully at the time that I can still tell you exactly where I was sitting: in a lecture hall of the Benson Building watching the devotional being broadcast from the Marriott Center. This address, entitled “Cast Not Away Therefore Your Confidence,” has remained a staple in my gospel study for these last two decades. Each time I read it, I am reminded to always remember the tender feelings of the Spirit. In that address, Elder Holland, referring to the adversity that inevitably accompanies significant revelation, said, “Don’t panic and retreat. Don’t lose your confidence. Don’t forget how you once felt. Don’t distrust the experience you had.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Do the Required Spiritual Work**

I hope that you have had experiences with the spirit of revelation. Although you may not have seen grand miracles, I hope you have felt the tender feelings of the Holy Ghost comforting you and confirming truth to you. I have never had an angel appear to me, and I suspect I never will. But I have felt the confirming witness of the Holy Ghost. My search for truth and understanding is not over. I hope that I have another fifty or so years to walk the earth and continue in my quest to learn the mysteries of God. I hope that in this time I will receive answers to questions I wrestle with now.

President Nelson said, “In coming days, it will not be possible to survive spiritually without the guiding, directing, comforting, and constant influence of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>17</sup> It is difficult for me to imagine a stronger statement from our prophet on the importance of personal revelation. Given this emphasis, I imagine we all have some work to do to increase our capacity to hear and feel the Spirit speaking to us.

President Nelson also said:

*I urge you to stretch beyond your current spiritual ability to receive personal revelation, for the Lord has promised that “if thou shalt [seek], thou shalt receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge, that though mayest know the mysteries and peaceable things—that which bringeth joy, that which bringeth life eternal.”<sup>18</sup>*

I pray that you will heed the call of our prophet and “choose to do the spiritual work required to enjoy the gift of the Holy Ghost and hear the voice of the Spirit more frequently and more clearly.”<sup>19</sup> I testify that the Lord is aware of you, your needs, and your questions. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. Robert D. Hales, “Waiting upon the Lord: Thy Will Be Done,” *Ensign*, November 2011.
2. Robert D. Hales, *Return: Four Phases of Our Mortal Journey Home* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 87.
3. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “What Is Truth?” CES devotional address, 13 January 2013.
4. Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” *Ensign*, May 2018.
5. Uchtdorf, “What Is Truth?”
6. Julie B. Beck, “And upon the Handmaids in Those Days Will I Pour Out My Spirit,” *Ensign*, May 2010.
7. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church”; quoting Joseph Smith, *HC* 3:381.
8. Jeffrey R. Holland, “An High Priest of Good Things to Come,” *Ensign*, November 1999; emphasis in original.
9. 2 Nephi 28:30.
10. Hales, “Waiting Upon the Lord.”
11. Hales, “Waiting Upon the Lord”; quoting Alma 32:41.
12. Joseph Smith—History 1:11.
13. Joseph Smith—History 1:13.
14. Uchtdorf, “What Is Truth?”
15. D&C 20:77, 79.
16. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Cast Not Away Therefore Your Confidence,” BYU devotional address, 2 March 1999.
17. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church.”
18. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church”; quoting D&C 42:61.
19. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church.”