

The Power of Your Words

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I would like to explain the sequence of how I was first contacted to speak at this devotional. It was on a Monday that I got a text message from a number I didn't recognize. It had been a hectic day, and I didn't read the text fully. Thinking it was a request to speak at an upcoming Church assignment, I texted back politely asking who the text was from.

Matthew O. Richardson, BYU advancement vice president, responded that it was he who had sent the text asking me to speak at a BYU devotional.

The first thought that popped into my mind was, "Are you crazy? Do you not realize that I can barely speak the English language, let alone speak in front of so many people?"

My wife, who was with me at the time, responded without hesitation, "That is desperation, not inspiration!"

I texted President Richardson back with, "I think you have the wrong Craig Manning."

He then replied, "Oops, sorry, I do have the wrong person!" But he then clarified that he did have the right person.

As intimidating as it is to speak in front of you, the experience of preparing for this devotional has been great. I have found that every time I have put on the radio, in every activity I have participated in, and with every thought I have had, I have double-checked myself to make sure I was

in alignment with the Holy Ghost so as to have the Spirit with me. I do pray that the Spirit will be with me today as I deliver my thoughts.

I would like to talk to you today about a couple of life-changing lessons the Lord has taught me.

I was born and raised in Canberra, Australia. My mother was, and still is, a Catholic, and my father was a member of the Church of England before he passed away from cancer twenty years ago. We attended church on Sundays, and I attended Sunday School, completing my first Holy Communion. As I got older, I started playing rugby. Games were on Sundays, and it wasn't long before we stopped attending church.

I remember coming home from a rugby game one Sunday when my mother said to me, "You are really good at sports, so you won't be very good at school."

This statement confused me. Although I didn't have the maturity and clarity of thought at the time to articulate my emotions, I can look back now and see why this statement bothered me. Was there some phenomenon that controlled my destiny? I couldn't help being good at sports; it just seemed to happen. Every time I participated in an athletic contest, I was reminded that I was a

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good athlete. So did that mean I had no chance of ever being a good student, and did I have any say in any of this?

I don't share this story to accuse my mother of bad parenting but rather to illustrate what can happen when we don't understand the Lord's plan or, more important, when we don't learn to live and apply the gospel of Jesus Christ. I spent my teenage years focusing the majority of my attention on sports, particularly on tennis, while directing little attention to my academics. Doing so had become a habit, and I never really stopped to consider doing anything different. This was not to say that I wasn't attending school; I never missed a class unless ill. But just because I was there physically did not mean I was there mentally. I was passing classes without really learning anything. I don't believe I was unintelligent; I was just never really paying attention.

Faith Is a Belief and an Action

From the *Lectures on Faith* we read:

“Now faith is the substance (assurance) of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” [Hebrews 11:1]

*From this we learn that faith is the assurance which men have of the existence of things which they have not seen, and the principle of **action** in all intelligent beings.* [7 (1.8–9); emphasis added]

My personal interpretation of this passage is that without a belief that it is possible to be successful in the classroom, we will not put forth any action toward being successful. I had been in the classroom physically but not mentally; my mind was somewhere else. When I was in high school, my mind was more often than not on the tennis court.

Another passage from the *Lectures on Faith* reads:

*If men were duly to consider themselves, and turn their thoughts and reflections to the **operations of their own minds**, they would readily discover that it is faith, and faith only, which is the moving cause of **all action** in them; that without it **both mind and body** would*

be in a state of inactivity, and all their exertions would cease, both physical and mental. [7 (1.10); emphasis added]

My personal interpretation of this passage is that we don't do anything without first putting in the mental effort. If we are not mentally engaged, we do nothing—or, at best, we do very little.

On the tennis court I had, first, the belief that I was good or could be good, which then, second, led to the physical effort and hard work. In the classroom I did not believe I was smart or could be smart; I turned up physically but did not apply myself mentally.

I love Doctrine and Covenants 130:18–19:

Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection.

And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come.

To me, these two scriptures map out the formula for success: we need to work hard both mentally and physically to increase our knowledge and intelligence.

The Danger of Self-Doubt

By the time I had graduated from year twelve, I had become an accomplished tennis player, and I was selected to travel around Europe with a team of Australian prospects. We spent the first month in France, traveling around playing in small pro tournaments. It was at the end of the winter, so the tournaments were on fast indoor courts. Because I am from Australia and I grew up playing on artificial grass courts, my tennis game was built for quick, explosive points. I did well the first month, performing to my potential and winning a lot of matches on the fast indoor courts. I thought, “This is it; I am making my dreams come true.”

Feeling really good about myself, I left France with my team and headed for Austria. The first

tournament of the summer was on slow red clay. If you don't understand the mechanics of the greatest game ever invented—and, I might add, the toughest mental sport to master—going from fast indoor courts to slow red clay requires a dramatic shift in skill sets. For the first time—and the only time in my forty years of playing tennis—I lost 6–0 6–0, a double bagel, we call it. It rocked my world. I had no idea what had gone wrong. Unwisely, I dwelled on my deficiencies from the match for days; a week later I was still dwelling on the loss. At the time I didn't realize I was doing anything wrong.

I have since learned that dwelling obsessively on what we do wrong is one of the greatest sources of interference to maximizing our potential. Self-doubt is dangerous. I once had a young thirteen-year-old snowboarder, in answer to my question of what it means to doubt yourself, say, “Don't say don't.” It is unimaginable the damage that self-doubt does to your hopes, dreams, and hard-earned skills.

This is what doubt looked like for me: I would miss a backhand into the top of the net and say to myself, “Not again. Your backhand stinks. You can't make a backhand. Why do you even play this game? You just stink.”

The problem with doubt is that it doesn't just stay isolated to your backhand. Doubt is a mental habit, and it can—and does—spread to other areas of your life.

Not identifying the root of the problem at the time, I struggled on the tour for the next year and a half, ending my pro tennis aspirations. My poor performance would later be a blessing because I never made any money and could still claim amateur status.

Since that time I have seen self-doubt in many people: athletes, coaches, musicians, students, and children. And as a bishop, I see it in the ward members who I am a steward over. Once self-doubt takes hold of an individual, action is halted. I believe doubt to be one of, if not the greatest of, the adversary's tools. It is the antithesis of faith. President Thomas S. Monson recently said,

“Remember that faith and doubt cannot exist in the same mind at the same time, for one will dispel the other” (“Be an Example and a Light,” *Ensign*, November 2015).

When the opportunity arose for me to come and play tennis at BYU, I thought it was an opportunity to reset. However, I quickly learned that practice does not make perfect; once a bad mental habit is created, it will not go away anytime soon. The problem for me was that I didn't know how to fix my bad mental habits. I knew faith was at the root of the answer, but how do you *do* faith? How do you apply faith on the tennis court, in the classroom, and in life from one moment to the next?

I thought that the answers might come from the field of psychology. I had always been fascinated by the mind, and I believed it was a key component to success not only on the tennis court but in life. I switched from studying accounting to studying psychology and began a journey that has led me to many personal discoveries.

The Law of Occupied Space

One of the greatest of these discoveries is that no matter how well the scientific method is applied to human behavior, if I cannot find the parallelism between a theory and the gospel of Jesus Christ, I am very cautious of using that theory. If a connection can clearly be made between a natural law and the gospel, I have found that that law always helps people to be better.

One such law is the law of occupied space. This law states that an object can only occupy one place at a time. As it applies to the mind, both faith and fear, self-belief and self-doubt, or simply positive and negative thoughts cannot occupy the mind at the same time.

Doctrine and Covenants 130:20–21 states:

There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—

And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated.
[Emphasis added]

I interpret this to mean that any law that is discovered by a man or a woman was originally created by the Lord, and obtaining any blessings—such as winning a tennis match or building a loving relationship with a spouse—requires obedience to that law.

I love this law and have received tremendous blessings from learning how to apply it. When I was a student at BYU, I realized that I needed to think more positively. I started working on this, and every time I caught myself thinking or talking to myself in negative, reactive ways, saying, “Your backhand stinks” or “Don’t miss that backhand,” I would stop that thought and immediately replace it with thoughts such as “I love my backhand” or “I am going to rip it down the line.” And instead of saying to myself, “School is tough; BYU is too hard for me,” I started telling myself, “I’ve got this; I can get good grades.” At some point I realized that I would always say to myself, “Don’t forget this” or “You’d better not forget this for the exam,” so one of my favorite phrases became “I will remember this.”

It took some time, but everything started to change. I was playing amazing tennis (at least for me), and I was studying half the time and getting better grades—a lot better. More important, there was no more fear. This change in thinking was a constant work in progress, and I constantly battled to apply the Lord’s lessons.

Faith Begins with How You Talk to Yourself

What is potentially the greatest lesson the Lord has taught me is that faith begins with how you talk to yourself.

From the *Lectures on Faith* we read:

It is by words . . . with which every being works when he works by faith. God said, “Let there be light, and there was light.” Joshua spake, and the great lights which God had created stood still. Elijah commanded, and the heavens were stayed for the space of three years and six months, so that it did not rain. . . . All this was done by faith. . . . Faith, then, works by words; and with these [words] its mightiest works have been, and will be, performed. [61 (7.3)]

As I continued my education, my passion for wanting to understand the application of true principles and facts continued to grow. I was fortunate that BYU hired me as the women’s head tennis coach, and I worked hard to apply what I was being taught. As the time arrived to do my dissertation, I wanted to study how attentional control, or focus, impacted human performance. While working on my dissertation, I would awake early in the morning and pray for guidance from the Lord. It was a draining experience; having a full-time job, four kids, and a dissertation to write did not come easy for me. I will forever be indebted to my wife’s sacrifices during this period of time.

Out of this experience the Lord taught me how to take principles, facts, or ideas and break them down into actionable knowledge. This process is called mind mapping or coding the mind, turning knowledge into an action or a skill, and it applies not only to physical skills but to mental skills. Mind mapping is accomplished through the creation of relevant cues. A relevant cue is two to three actionable words that act as triggers and that are exact enough to hold an individual’s attention under extreme pressure or extreme boredom. These cues enable an individual to direct his or her attention to very specific actions, rapidly creating relevant skills.

I applied this process to my coaching and was amazed by the dramatic increase in performance from the tennis players I was working with. Prior to using relevant cues, I would work hard during a one-hour tennis lesson to have the athlete hitting the ball well by the end of the hour, only to have the athlete return for the next lesson and have to spend the first twenty to thirty minutes going back over what we had last worked on. Retention was not where it needed to be.

When we used relevant cues, the athlete’s retention increased to the point that it would take a maximum of only five minutes to review the skills the athlete had learned in the previous lesson, as the skills had been retained. This increased retention allowed for rapid progression to the next skill. I started applying this process to

other sports and then to business, then to music, and now to addiction recovery.

One athlete I worked with using this method was a U.S. Olympic mogul skier who, seven months prior to the Vancouver Olympics, was on the C team and was not ranked very high. Her coach approached me and asked me to work with her with the hope that she might be ready to compete at the Sochi Olympics four and a half years down the road. I remember the conversation. The coach wanted to test the effectiveness of mental strength training. He said to me that this particular athlete would do what I asked and that she was my guinea pig.

The athlete worked hard on training her thoughts to be positive and proactive and on using relevant cues to purify her thought patterns. She did everything I asked. On November 19 she called me in tears. She had just made the last discretionary position on the World Cup tour. This was a subjective coaches' decision to bring someone onto the World Cup team who had minimal professional experience.

As the season progressed through the early winter months, this athlete continued to develop her skills rapidly to the point that, by the time the World Cup at Deer Valley came around at the end of January, she was sitting in tenth place on the tour. She had achieved several fourth-place finishes to get to tenth in the world, but she had never finished on the podium.

One of the tools I like the athletes I work with to have is a power statement. A power statement is a tool to use when doubt comes at critical moments. It floods the mind with positive, strong thoughts and instantly squeezes out any negative thoughts and emotions.

After the prequalifying races, this athlete was in fourth place. She attended to all of the media obligations, family commitments, and so forth and then came over to talk to me. This is the conversation that transpired:

Athlete: "I don't think today is my day."

Me: "Really?"

Athlete: "There is a ton of media here and a lot of friends and family. I don't think today is my day."

Me: "Yeah, you just stink, don't you!"

Athlete: "What?"

Me: "Well, is that the right mindset?"

Athlete: "Oh, right. I need to remember my power statement."

She told me after the event that when she had gotten on the chairlift to go up for her finals run, the doubt had gotten in again. She began telling herself, "It's okay. No one expected me to do this well. My family will still love me."

She then caught herself and said, "No! Today is my day! I am making it happen today!"

She told me she was feeling good mentally while being processed for her run. And then, while standing in line only two athletes away from her turn, the doubt came in again: "It is okay. No one expects me to—"

This time she was mad. She got out of her skis, walked out of the starter's box, and yelled up into the mountain, "Today is my day! I am making it happen today!"

I could see her determination as she came back into the starter's gate. She put on her skis and grabbed her poles with purpose.

This athlete ended up skiing faster than she had ever skied before. She was farther on the front of her boots, she got bigger air, and she finished tied for first place. Two days later she backed up her performance with a second-place win.

This athlete, who only six months earlier was called a guinea pig, went to the Vancouver Olympics as the number-two mogul skier in the world and as our top U.S. mogul skier. All of this happened because she applied the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I love studying the Lord's mysteries, and I love the Book of Mormon. I make these comments in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.