

Becoming

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In 1962 a 17-year-old entered BYU as a freshman. He anticipated majoring in architecture or engineering—something important—but he had almost no idea of what awaited him because no one in his family, or, for the most part, his extended family, had ever attended college. How different the subsequent decades became because of his decision a few months earlier to resign an appointment to the Air Force Academy and attend BYU instead. As is so often the case when students work through the process of selecting a major—or having it select them—his area of study interest shifted. Involvement in the sciences gave way to a passion for something else, and a lifelong love affair with the arts and education was born.

Today that young man, now replaced with an older version, stands before you, a bit nervous, looking out over your faces and yet inwardly smiling and a bit envious of the potential of what lies ahead for all of you. I encourage you to enjoy every day of your odyssey and never forget to be vocally thankful for the wonderful gift of life and choice and learning that is yours to experience.

Since that day when I first arrived at BYU, 41 years have passed. In all of those years except one, I have been connected to this campus. What a rare blessing it has been to spend two-thirds of my life associated with this institution. It is

an honor to be asked to share a few thoughts with you today. I acknowledge my wife, Janice, a number of our children and other family members, friends, colleagues, and, most of all, you students for whom all of this exists.

The central mission of this great university has never changed and never will, and each of us is privileged to receive the blessings associated with spending time on this campus and sharing in the wisdom and vision of those who dug the wells from which we now drink.

I love BYU and all it represents, and I love the gospel of Jesus Christ that brings to this university an additional power to inform and transform and imbue our lives with joy and happiness and understanding and fulfillment. I have been truly blessed to be able to combine who I am with what I do through 40-plus years at BYU.

I have chosen today to construct my remarks around a few of the experiences that I had as one of six artists invited to work on the murals for the Nauvoo Temple. I will remember and cherish forever the time that I spent working on the murals. It was a unique and beautiful

Robert Marshall was a BYU professor of visual arts when this devotional address was given on 10 June 2003.

project from inception to conclusion. It was a project that provided many learning moments and tender exchanges. There were also numerous opportunities for interaction with the Brethren, which taught me even more respect for the mantle that they wear and the global implications of the work they direct.

And yet, as profound as it was, the project is now over. I will admit that it was nice to be thought of, for a while at least, as someone making a special contribution to the temple. But we all know there is danger in being a celebrity for too long, and every day that passes extends the distance from when I *was important* until now, when I merely remember *thinking* I was important. So, in trying to focus on what of *true importance* I could talk about today, I decided to center my thoughts on what I learned from the mural experience that has continued to influence my life for good and helped me see *additional things of importance*. I pray that my insights will be useful in helping you see yourself more clearly.

Insight 1

We are all in the daily process of learning and improving—becoming someone with something of value to contribute.

In 1988 I was asked to be part of the making of the temple instructional film that is shown today throughout the world. I remember a late-night discussion with the other artists involved in the project in which we acknowledged that, since the Church no longer had murals painted for the temples, working on the film was as close as we would ever get to doing murals like those done years before. Not one of us had any idea that the future would allow new murals as part of the temple experience. Each of us just continued to paint—refining our talents and abilities in preparation for something that we had told ourselves would never come. And yet it did come. All of you are in that same position today, preparing without knowing, making

yourselves capable of giving a full measure when the request comes.

Opportunities come after appropriate preparation. We are all—as a result of the choices that we are making today and every day—preparing ourselves to provide future service. The extent of that service, and the preparation that it will require, is unknown to us at this time. We have been given many talents, interests, and inclinations. Seeds have already been planted in our garden, but we will only realize their potential as we become active caretakers. We will have a number of different gardens throughout our lives, and all will provide opportunities for learning.

We are being prepared to perform many great and marvelous things in our families, communities, and church. It is essential that we not get discouraged and that we remain patient in the process, trusting that the Lord knows our heart and our abilities and can increase both to accomplish any righteous task.

That is, in fact, why we are here. It is a continuation of our divine nature. We have all been given gifts and talents to help us navigate this life and allow us to share what is unique to each of us. Moroni reminds us that we should “deny not the gifts of God, for they are many; and they come from the same God” (Moroni 10:8). Through Joseph Smith the Lord admonished us to earnestly seek “the best gifts, always remembering for what they are given” (D&C 46:8). Although talents are not specific gifts of the Spirit, they are nevertheless gifts that bless lives.

We must spend our lives amplifying our talents and getting good at something rather than waiting for some unique opportunity to present those talents. It is a very lengthy process. I have been painting for more than 40 years. Somewhere in that process I believe I learned how, and yet I have continued to paint. Knowing how is only the beginning. It’s amazing how much better we get at something when we keep doing it after we know how.

In the discipline of visual arts I have observed that students who succeed are those who develop a consuming love for “the doing.” For every student who says that they want to be an artist, my advice is always the same: “If you can possibly do something else, do it!” If you can’t, if you have to make art, then you have already defined yourself. You are who you are because of the choices you make about how you spend your time and energy and what you do when you have multiple choices.

That which gives pleasure and challenge and satisfaction always returns value. Our motivation to learn expands because we are nourished by what we are doing. There are also, however, times of despair, frustration, and feelings of inadequacy. Few complete the journey without questioning whether the price is too much to pay. Because of the seemingly overwhelming nature of the journey, it is easy to sometimes succumb to discouragement and forget that a loving Father intends us to find joy in every aspect of our lives. Target goals are important, but we must also enjoy each day of the doing—the acquiring of those goals.

Bless yourself with quiet, uninterrupted, reflective moments when you can reaffirm how very fortunate you are and how beautiful life is. Many times there is so much pressure in the quest to accomplish that we forget to value the need for meditative moments—and yet they are essential. Protect them.

A number of years ago I accompanied a group of students to paint and draw in Mexico for a spring term. Although there are many things that I remember about that experience, one activity in particular left its imprint as one of the truly significant memories of that trip. From early morning until evening we responded with pen and brush to the unique character of the quaint, colonial village where we were staying. A lot of art was made. It was hard work. The dinner hour signaled the return to the *posada* (or inn), followed by a critique of that day’s successes and failures. And although it

was exciting to see and discuss the work, the highlight of the day was yet to come. Each evening we would adjourn to the rooftop balcony overlooking the sights, sounds, and smells of the city and, in silent, almost monastic reverence, absorb the final moments of the day as the sun performed its spectacular descent.

How that casual, pleasant release progressed to an evening ritual, I’m not sure—but it did. It became a time when few words were spoken and all of us came to cherish the respite. Personal meditation and contemplation eventually became auditory as reflections that centered on events of the day were ruminated upon and amplified and invariably accelerated into thoughts of a more eternal nature. It became a truly magic time, and many of the discussions that followed and continued through the twilight and into the pensive purple of night had life-changing effects.

Conversation covered a wide range of topics, but invariably a spirit descended, hearts were softened, and thoughts became centered on issues of an eternal nature. All of us became better people as we allowed things of the Spirit to direct our thoughts and improve our countenances. The witness of the Holy Ghost clarified many things as we sat and listened and connected to others and ourselves. How singularly profound were those moments when the Holy Ghost was comfortable enough with our discussions to be able to contribute. In the book of John we read:

Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.
[John 16:13]

In the course of your education, safeguard times when you can petition the Holy Ghost for both confirmation and comfort. Without His influence, few accomplishments retain significance.

We are all in the daily process of learning and improving—becoming someone with something of value to contribute.

Insight 2

Everything we do should be an offering to the Lord. Every effort should be our best effort followed by a prayerful petition for divine acceptance and approval.

Since the completion of the Nauvoo murals, I smile to myself when I realize that what I thought was such a unique experience was, in fact, the way that I should approach everything that I do. It shouldn't require an invitation from the prophet or a "once-in-a-lifetime" commission to change my behavior. My performance should be constant. I should always be prayerful, sensitive, humble, and charitable. I should be Christ-centered in everything I do. Should artwork that I do for the Church receive a better effort than that for another client? Should I be more righteous as a bishop than I am in another calling? Should I be more ethical because I happen to work as an employee of the Church than if I work at the 7-11 in Springville? No.

Every task should merit my best effort. My character must be consistent and not situational. We are the sum total of all of our daily choices—not only the way we are in uniquely exceptional situations.

As artists, each of us was honored to be involved with the murals and tried to approach the work with sensitivity to the necessity of matching our efforts with the sacred nature of the edifice. There was a great deal of discussion about the need to be "worthy vessels" and to address the work in a way that would elevate us to an appropriate level before the Lord.

This is the process of sanctification. By always measuring our choices and efforts against their appropriateness before the Lord, we accept the ordinances of the gospel of Jesus Christ and allow the Holy Ghost to remain as our constant guide. We become like Him because we want our every action to please Him.

Elder Boyd K. Packer clarified this process when he counseled that we must first sanctify ourselves; second, develop our gifts; and then, third, bless the lives of others (see "The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord," *Ensign*, August 1976, 60–65). I believe he was telling us to be honorable, live the gospel, work very hard at being capable of providing a valuable service, and then to think beyond ourselves.

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Insight 3

Appreciate the value of every contribution. Some are more visible, but all are essential. If the worth of a soul is great in the sight of the Lord, then each one's contributions are no less important.

During the time before the dedication, when the Nauvoo Temple was open to the public, all of those contributors who were involved in the construction were invited to a special open house. Two days were set apart for contractors, craftsmen, and their families to see the finished building. Hundreds attended. In a manner similar to a regular open house, everyone went through in designated groups. It became known in our group that I was one of the artists involved. Our tour leader asked if I would share some thoughts about the murals. I did, and people were openly complimentary about the work.

As the conversation continued, a woman introduced herself and quietly took me over to the door of the Creation Room. She reached down, turned the ornate handle, and said, "My husband made all of the doorknobs." They were impressive, but even more impressive was her smile. There was no escaping the pride that she felt for the contribution that her husband had made to the temple. Would each knob be noticed in the same way as the murals? I doubt it. Would her husband receive the same applause for his work? Probably not. Were the handles less important than the murals? No. Every consideration

to quality would eventually, collectively, present itself as an offering to the Lord.

The total attention to detail in the Nauvoo Temple—from the highly visible to the obscure—was inspiring. Every contributor worried whether his or her work would be accepted as an appropriate offering. In a letter from the Twelve Apostles to the Church on January 14, 1845, Brigham Young wrote about a similar effort on the original temple. He said:

Great numbers of carpenters, masons, and other workmen are daily engaged in this arduous undertaking, so that not only is stone being prepared, but the sash, flooring, seats, and other things are progressing rapidly. [HC 7:357]

No task was too small, none was unimportant. Every effort was a significant contribution to the total structure.

Each of us, in our own way, can make uniquely essential contributions to the lives of all that we meet. Some of us hold titles of importance; some of us serve in anonymity. Some of us receive applause; some of us give in ways that are seldom noticed. And yet all of us have the potential to bless the kingdom with our efforts. It is so important that we believe in the value of who we are and what we can give.

Many years ago, when our second-to-the-oldest son was about seven or eight, he and I were walking along a dusty gravel lane extending from our home to some open fields behind. I don't even remember where we were going or why. And it doesn't matter any more now than it did then. It was a time when a little boy could be doing something with his dad—only, as usual, the boy was having a much better time than the dad was. I had more important things to do. I thought, "Okay, I'll make time for this little adventure, but not too much time." Dad time is really valuable—so, up the road to look at the horses, and then back to what needed my attention at home.

And then it happened. He had been picking up stones from the road and throwing them at everything. He stopped, picked up another one, and then ran up to me. He put the pebble to his tongue, licked it, looked at it again, held it up to my eyes, and said, "Isn't it beautiful!" It wasn't a question but rather, for him, an unequivocal reality. It *was* beautiful—colorfully streaked and striated in taupe and gray with faceted edges and unusually symmetrical sides.

And yet only seconds before it had been ordinary, no different from the thousands of other rocks strewn all over the lane. What transformed it into an object of beauty was nothing more than a second look—the taking of time to discover and then appreciate its uniqueness. Its hidden properties unveiled themselves. I came to understand what it was beneath what I assumed it was. Seeing beyond its sameness allowed it to reveal mysterious potential. I learned a great lesson that day.

Appreciate the value of every contribution. Some are more visible, but all are essential. If the worth of a soul is great in the sight of the Lord, then each one's contributions are no less important.

Insight 4

There is a living prophet directing the affairs of the Church.

I remember when President Hinckley made the announcement that a temple would be rebuilt in Nauvoo. A prophet had spoken, and I knew that what he said was of God. The day before the announcement most of us had not considered the possibility, and then the day after it was as though we had known it all of our lives. It was the way it should be.

Little has changed since 1845. The mantle of prophet, seer, and revelator reaches both up to the heavens and down to the more temporal. William Weeks, the architect of the original Nauvoo Temple, had a lengthy discussion with the Prophet Joseph Smith about the shape of the windows.

Each lobbied their position adamantly. Finally, Joseph said:

“I wish you to carry out my designs. I have seen in vision the splendid appearance of that building illuminated, and will have it built according to the pattern shown me.” [HC 6:197; emphasis in original]

I’m sure in Brother Weeks’ mind there was no more need for debate.

No less so than Joseph Smith, President Gordon B. Hinckley wears the current mantle of divine prophetic leadership. After a visit from the First Presidency to our temporary painting studios to review the murals and give final approval before shipping them back to Nauvoo, I was surprised and a bit unsettled to receive a phone call at home the following Monday from the prophet, expressing his concern over a part of the mural image.

Like Joseph and the original Nauvoo windows, President Hinckley had spiritual confirmation of what was needed. He had been “thinking all weekend” about one aspect of my mural design that kept troubling him. At the time of his visit I had explained the aesthetic motivation for my part of the mural, and he made a couple of suggestions about the overall image. As the visit ended, I felt that all I had done had received approval. But the Spirit had continued to whisper disquieting thoughts into his mind for the next couple of days. His assessment confirmed sensitivity to issues beyond those that had informed my involvement as the painter. He explained his concern and asked if I would mind modifying the painting. As with Brother Weeks, there was no need for more debate. How perceptive President Hinckley had been, and how gentle and respectful was his concern that nothing be introduced into the temple that could become a distraction.

There is a living prophet directing the affairs of the Church.

Insight 5

Prayers are answered.

As artists, our original instruction from the First Presidency was, in fact, very simple. We were asked to paint something that would be appropriate for the function of the temple and be consistent with what might have been included in the original building. To do something worthy of that description was not lost on any of the six artists. Each artist was encouraged to let their own peculiar painting process and style find voice in the murals. Complete artistic freedom directed our choices, even though we knew that final approval would come from the Brethren. Our job was to bring all of our experience and abilities to the task and then to allow the Spirit to confirm our decisions.

I have been asked on various occasions if at any time during the mural painting experience I had a truly spiritual epiphany—some extraordinary help from the other side, some angelically assisted insights. I always disappoint them when my response is no. Solutions came as a result of work, rework, and more work. Validation came in those quiet moments of reflection that I referred to earlier. There was constant prayer for assistance and clarification, but no answers were delivered in extraordinary ways. There was no dramatic divine intervention.

No matter how passionate the plea, prayer was always answered as a whispered reply from the Holy Ghost—a gentle warmth in the bosom replacing the question or concern with confidence and correctness. Spiritual confirmation came in quiet reflective moments after we had determined a course of action, painted through numerous possibilities, and then questioned our efforts. Confirmations were received in the assurance that we had accomplished the task and in the feeling that the offering was acceptable. The process was, and is, so simple that it is too

often assumed that there must be more to it than that.

Prayers are answered.

Insight 6

I am thankful for my life, my membership in the Church of Jesus Christ, the gift of the Holy Ghost, and the priesthood that I hold.

To say that I am thankful is so inadequate when measured against the life that I have been allowed to live. I have been blessed with artistic and academic opportunities, as well as associations with choice people who love the Lord and live quality lives. So many people have given clarification to my confusion by their examples of righteous living. The gospel has centered my life and provided numerous course adjustments and corrections. Callings have increased my understanding and taught me to serve prayerfully and humbly. I hope that the Lord is pleased with what has been given back, with what has been done to give service.

Those who have acquired some degree of prominence and notoriety can relate to the myth of importance that accompanies performance in highly visible arenas assumed to require special talents or gifts. Artists—like athletes, politicians, executives, and, yes, even educators—are continually given deference and applause for their achievements. It is so easy to allow the accolades of others to control the perception of one's own importance. The honors of men are seductive badges that we all like to wear.

Each of us has the capacity to accomplish much good in this life, but we must always return credit and appreciation to the source of all that is good and truthful. I thank God for His trust, His patience and forgiveness, and the agency and opportunity that defines mortality. I pray to never offend Him or disappoint Him, but I know that I have and that I will.

I am thankful for my life, my membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints, the gift of the Holy Ghost, and the priesthood that I hold.

I was watching a TV program a while back on the transcendental writer Thoreau, who, when dying of tuberculosis, was asked, "Have you made your peace with God?"

To this he answered, "We never quarreled."

To be in harmony with God is the most important thing that we do. We are to love Him and keep His commandments.

May I conclude with a few questions that keep me from quarreling with God? Try to listen with your heart and ask yourself if there is relevance to you.

- Is the restored gospel of Jesus Christ the center of my life?
- Do I strive to keep the covenants that I have made and keep my life in harmony with the gospel?
- Do I have a clear and recent memory of how I felt when I knew that the Spirit was with me?
- What keeps the Spirit from my life? Can I remove the obstacle?
- Do I shun everything that detracts from my spiritual development and desensitizes my ability to connect to things of the Spirit?
- What is the next step in my personal purification process? How do I replace involvement with worldly activities with those of the Spirit?
- Do I accept responsibility for my own actions? How do I deal with complacency, self-deception, and denial in my behavior?
- Do I measure my choices against the standards of the world or the kingdom of God?
- Do I sustain the general and local authorities and support, without reservation, those called as prophets, seers, and revelators? Do I follow their counsel and look to their guidance?
- Do I understand the benefits of service? Am I truly charitable, caring, and kind

with everyone I meet? Do I seek opportunities to give?

- Do I understand the importance of the temple and seek the blessings of being worthy to enter and return regularly?

- Do I like the person I am becoming? Am I happy?

It is my prayer for all of us that we can find joy and fulfillment in all that we do. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.