

The Path to Transformative Change

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Good morning, brothers and sisters. Thank you for being here on this beautiful August morning. I am honored and humbled to speak to you today.

There is a student in the Dance Department named Brayden who has influenced the lives of peers and dance faculty alike through his appreciation for the experiences he encounters in dance coursework. Brayden makes his appreciation known in moments when, with an audible sigh, he utters, “That changed my life!” No one ever doubts Brayden’s sincerity or the reality of his experience. Indeed, we wonder how we might inspire all of our students to allow their lives to be changed and transformed in similar ways.

The process of change, whether temporal or spiritual, can be uncomfortable: perhaps we like ourselves just as we are. After all, some of our flaws can feel like old friends! So why do we need to change at all?

If we look to the scriptures, we are taught the importance of changing and even transforming our lives in order to prepare to meet God. The apostle Paul taught, “Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed” through the “perfect, will of God” (Romans 12:2).

The type of transformation that Paul spoke of implies a change from our carnal, natural state to a more godlike state wherein we can abide God’s presence; for the natural man cannot stand in the presence of God (see D&C 67:12).

Mosiah taught that, with God’s help, our hearts and desires can be transformed so completely that we put away the natural man altogether. After King Benjamin’s moving speech, the people cried with one voice, saying, “The Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent . . . has wrought a mighty change . . . in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2).

I love Mosiah’s reference to “a *mighty* change”—not a small, inconsequential modification but a transformation that impacts every aspect of our being, a transformation that alters us in such a way that we are not the same person as before. A mighty change of this magnitude will undoubtedly influence both the temporal and spiritual aspects of our lives because it allows us to see everything through new eyes.

Pamela S. Musil, associate chair of the BYU Department of Dance, delivered this devotional address on August 6, 2019.

So what does it mean to allow our lives and our hearts to be changed by the choices we make and the experiences we encounter daily, weekly, monthly, or over the course of a lifetime? How do we prepare ourselves to be more receptive to change? Today I would like to discuss five principles that I believe are requisite for realizing the lasting, transformative change that the Lord requires of us.

Principle One: Pay Attention

The first principle is to pay attention to where you are going.

My earliest memories of formal dance training revolve around learning to tap dance. At the tender age of nine, I began making the weekly trek up a steep flight of stairs that led to the dance studio above the old Spanish Fork fire station where I took classes. I remember putting on my tap shoes and hearing the satisfying sound of the taps as I made my way to my designated spot on the dance floor to begin each week's lesson.

I can still hear my teacher's voice calling out, "Shuffle-hop-step, flap-ball-change," over and over again as she drilled us on basic tap vocabulary. But despite my teacher's diligent instruction, I think I spent more time flailing about than actually mastering the steps. Though I loved my dance class, my mind often wandered to unimportant things, and somehow my feet refused to follow the words and rhythms that our teacher called out.

In our shared human experience, many of us similarly struggle at times with not knowing where to focus our attention as it wanders to unimportant things. Though my lack of focus in dance class had minor consequences, failure to pay attention to more important temporal and spiritual matters can have devastating consequences. Paying attention to where we are going is one of the most fundamental things we can do in our process of becoming who we hope to become and who the Lord wants us to become.

After a year of weekly dance lessons, I remember performing in the annual dance review, and, in spite of my teacher's persistent drilling, I was still unable to perform the required tap steps. Even at that young age I realized that I could do

better, and I vowed in that very moment to pay closer attention to the steps and rhythms. That one small decision, trivial as it may seem, was a life-altering moment for me. Though no one—including myself—would ever have predicted that I would become a dancer, judging by my childhood tap dancing skills, that one seemingly insignificant decision to pay closer attention to what mattered set me on the path toward my eventual profession as a dance educator.

All of us are surrounded by daily choices, opportunities, and demands that compete for our attention: our cell phones, social media, recreation, employment, school studies, relationships, and the practice of our faith. How we choose to attend to the various factors that compete for our attention will ultimately determine our life's journey. Becoming distracted by fleeting pursuits will never lead to the kind of transformative change that really matters.

So what will help us rise above the distractions that surround us and attend to the changes that need to happen in our lives?

In dance training, students must learn to be in tune with their bodies enough to recognize what needs to change and, subsequently, to notice change when it actually takes place. Dancers who attend to physical and kinesthetic sensations on a daily basis begin to notice subtle differences in posture, balance, or movement on any given day. Subtle changes in posture, patterns of practice, and movement behavior can literally reshape the body's architecture over time, either for better or for worse.

What patterns of behavior do we as individuals find in our own lives that require our attention? And how do these patterns over time begin to shape and define our character, our spirit, and even our eternal destiny? Even as members of Christ's Church, we sometimes fail to recognize when our patterns of behavior are not rooted on the gospel path. Yet our Heavenly Father, the source of all knowledge, has laid out a pattern by which we can gain the essential skills needed to return to His presence: "And again, I will give unto you a pattern in all things, that ye may not be deceived" (D&C 52:14). If we plant our feet firmly on the path the Lord has set out for us, He will

teach us “in the way of wisdom” (Proverbs 4:11) and of knowledge and lead us along the correct path, even the “strait and narrow path which leads to eternal life” (2 Nephi 31:18).

Principle Two: Stay on the Path

A second principle that leads to transformative change is to stay on the path of daily practice.

Transformative change can occur suddenly in one singular event, but more often it is a *process* that takes place gradually through applied, focused, daily practice. To stay on the path of any pursuit, whether it be physical, intellectual, or spiritual, requires the discipline to dedicate oneself to a lifetime of daily practice and application.

For those who choose to stay on the path to become dancers, the required discipline is exacting. The schooling of an accomplished dancer can take decades, entailing thousands of pliés and untold hours of rehearsal. Through daily practice, a dancer becomes intimately familiar with the sometimes tedious repetition of exercises, with frequent fatigue, and with sore, aching muscles. A dancer’s path is fraught with many, many mistakes, many corrections, and, at times, frustration, discouragement, and doubt in one’s ability to succeed. During these moments, the temptation to quit can seem overwhelming.

Dance training can be compared to a crucible, which Merriam-Webster defines as a “situation in which concentrated forces interact to cause or influence change or development.”¹ Another source defines it as a “severe trial . . . in which different elements interact, leading to the creation of something new.”² Those who choose to endure through the long hours, weeks, and years of self-mastery that are required to become an accomplished dancer eventually find that the crucible of practice has forged a new body that is strong, athletic, fine-tuned, and expressive.

Our lives, like dance training, may also at times plod tediously forward and at other times be fraught with difficulties. Sheri L. Dew addressed life’s daily challenges when she stated:

There will be days when you feel defeated, exhausted, and plain old beat-up by life’s whiplash. . . . Some days

*it will feel as though the veil between heaven and earth is made of reinforced concrete. . . . You may even face a crisis of faith. In fact, you can count on trials that test your testimony and your faith.*³

On my office wall is a saying attributed to the author Ian Maclaren: “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”⁴ This statement reminds me daily that *we*—each of us—are fighting hard battles. No one is exempt, because trials are a part of the human condition. As human beings, we make mistakes. We experience loss, illness, loneliness, and heartache. We become discouraged. We may even become disillusioned and question why we are on this path in the first place.

When we find ourselves succumbing to discouragement, disillusionment, or doubt, it can sometimes be tempting to give up trying altogether or to seek fulfillment that leads us off the gospel path. And yet that which the Savior offers us is exponentially more valuable than any fulfillment that can be found elsewhere. Simon Peter and Andrew, two humble fishermen, understood this principle, for when the Savior beckoned, “they straightway left their nets, and followed him” (Matthew 4:20). The price of discipleship would cost them their livelihood, yet they did not hesitate to follow Him.

Though we may not be asked to give up our livelihoods, the price of discipleship to Jesus Christ does require that we, too, devote our lives to the path of discipleship. We have been promised that those who choose to stay the course in spite of mistakes, heartaches, doubt, and discouragement will eventually emerge with strength of character and spirit that have been forged within the crucible of our daily struggles. It is often through long stretches of faithful practice and discipleship that the Lord takes what we offer Him and forges *us* into something new. Just as a dancer’s body is transformed over time, our very natures can be shaped and changed. Discipleship to Jesus Christ transforms all aspects of our being as His law becomes written in our hearts (see Jeremiah 31:33). When our hearts change, old things pass away and all things become new; figuratively, and perhaps

quite literally, we become new creatures in Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:17).

We may not always discern the change that is taking place within us over the decades that accumulate to a lifetime of discipleship. But as we look backward, we often recognize patterns of growth that have been forged in the crucible of our lived experiences. These changes come “line upon line,” prayer upon prayer, covenant upon covenant, trial upon trial, and “precept upon precept” (2 Nephi 28:30). “Here a little and there a little” (2 Nephi 28:30) we see how staying on the path of our daily practice has changed our hearts and transformed our character into something more beautiful and lovely than we could ever have imagined. And we come to understand that the price is always worthwhile: “And, if you keep my commandments and endure to the end you shall have eternal life, which gift is the greatest of all the gifts of God” (D&C 14:7).

Principle Three: Embrace the Path

A third principle in realizing transformative change is to embrace the path and have faith in its ability to lead us home. The distinction between *staying on the path* and *embracing the path* is in how we choose to make the journey: with fear, murmuring, self-pity, and doubt or with faith, submission, humor, and joy.

As with any highly disciplined movement form, the crucible of training that changes, forms, and reshapes a dancer’s body requires a deep and abiding passion for dancing, coupled with faith that the effort will lead to the desired transformation in dance skill. Even the finest dance tutoring can be ineffective if the dancer is not willing to trust and find joy in the process, especially in moments when the work is particularly hard.

Marjorie Pay Hinckley maintained that the best way to get through our hardest difficulties in life is to laugh. In her words, “You either have to laugh or cry. I prefer to laugh. Crying gives me a headache.”⁵ A dear friend who recently passed away often cited Sister Hinckley’s words. Even as she knew she was dying, my friend poked fun at herself in a humorous, self-deprecating way. She had an endearing gift for putting others at ease

by making them laugh. Even in our bleakest, most trying hours, humor can chase away the darkness that sometimes threatens to overtake us. Finding joy and humor in the journey—even when our path is strewn with difficulties—transforms not only our attitude about the trials we encounter but our ability to learn from and be tutored by them.

Several years ago I taught a beautiful dance education student named Michelle. Michelle had a difficult home life. Her parents had divorced, her father had not maintained contact, and she and her mother had a tenuous relationship. Sometimes Michelle confided in me, expressing deep yearning to feel her parents’ love. As if these challenges were not enough, Michelle was diagnosed with a relentless form of cancer, and the crucible of illness took command of her body. The cancer treatments robbed Michelle of her beautiful, white-blond hair, and, in spite of aggressive treatments, she grew steadily weaker.

But even as her physical body weakened, a transformation of another kind was taking place: Michelle’s very countenance began to change. Although she had previously been reserved and shy, Michelle began to radiate joy and goodness. It was not uncommon to see her somewhere within the halls of the Richards Building, her shiny bald head tied with a big pink bow and her smile the size of Texas! Rather than succumbing to self-pity and fear, Michelle chose to fill her days with joy and laughter, surrounded by those she loved most.

Not long before her death, she told me that, to her amazement and joy, the circumstances of her illness had initiated a healing process for her fractured family. Michelle had placed her trust in the hands of God and was rewarded with the ability to live out her remaining days with a heightened sense of happiness and love. Though she did not find physical healing, Michelle found the spiritual healing and profound joy that come only through Jesus Christ’s healing Atonement.

When we place our faith and trust in Christ’s ability to heal us, we surrender our will to the path that He requires of us. A passage of scripture that has guided me throughout my life is found in Proverbs 3:5–6:

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.

In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.

There have been several pivotal moments in my life when I have tangibly felt the presence of unseen hands guiding me from behind, directing me to where I should go. Each time I have followed their direction, I have been rewarded with unexpected outcomes and blessings that I never could have imagined for myself.

Trusting with all our hearts requires us to be vulnerable, to step into the unknown, and to swallow our doubts and fears. Trusting with all our hearts requires that we let go of our human need to be in control and instead surrender our hearts willingly to the unseen hands that direct our paths. The most supernal example of faith, trust, obedience, and surrender was demonstrated by the Savior, who, when facing His darkest hour of pain and anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane, cried out to His Father, “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matthew 26:39).

When we follow Christ’s example and willingly surrender to whatever crucibles are in store for us, we offer ourselves up to His incomprehensible capacity to take the incomplete, broken, and imperfect human being that we offer Him and to heal us. After all, the Savior has promised, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Notice that the promise includes *all* of us, regardless of our current or past circumstances. We need only to reach out to Him and ask.

Principle Four: Seek Perfection Through Jesus Christ

A fourth principle in realizing transformative change is to understand the Lord’s admonition to “be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). For in faithfully seeking to fulfill Christ’s admonition, some of us may be deceived by counterfeit standards of perfection.

Merriam-Webster defines the word *perfect* as “being entirely without fault or defect,” or, in essence, to be “flawless.”⁶ For dancers, inclinations toward perfectionism are not uncommon: being surrounded by mirrors, dancers are constantly reminded of their flaws and imperfections even as they strive to attain an exacting ideal of technical expertise and athleticism. Within this daily environment, dancers can easily embrace the deceptive belief that our bodies and actions must be flawless.

Popular media promotes similar ideals of perfection through airbrushed, photoshopped images of models, athletes, and superhumans on billboards, in TV ads, and in social media posts. Everywhere we turn we encounter images of astonishingly beautiful, seemingly perfect human beings that seem to suggest we should strive to become more like them. These deceptive illusions entice us to believe that if we work hard enough, train hard enough, study hard enough, or become thin or beautiful enough, we can become superhumans ourselves. But the truth is, we can never achieve the kind of perfection that these images suggest. Though we may earnestly strive to be perfect in all of our actions and doings, each of us—all of us—have flaws, and all of us make daily mistakes. When using worldly perfection as our measuring stick, we will never feel that we are enough.⁷

But worldly standards of perfection were not what the Savior had in mind for His disciples. If we look to other translations of the word *perfect*, we find opportunities to expand our understanding of what Christ is asking us to do. In Hebrew, to be perfect can mean “whole, sound, healthful,” and “having integrity.”⁸ In Greek, it means to be “complete.”⁹

What does it mean to become whole, healthful, sound, and complete?

For more than thirty years a dear friend and I have met almost every weekday—weather, schedules, and health permitting—for a shared morning power walk. In recent years we have been joined by additional walking partners, and together we have shared our life stories, our misgivings, and our heartaches, and we have found humor in divulging our silliest fears and shortcomings. Almost daily

we discuss gospel principles and acknowledge the vital role the Savior plays in our lives.

During the summertime our daily route takes us up a steep, difficult hill that some call Heartbreak Hill—probably named because everyone who climbs it feels like they are having a heart attack by the time they make it to the top! That hill taxes our wills and stamina regardless of how often we climb it, serving as a reminder of our human frailties and imperfections. But we persist in climbing it, one step at a time, and each time we reach the summit, we emerge with newfound strength and resolve to face the challenges in our lives with similar tenacity.

Through our daily conversation and the shared trial of climbing that hill, my friends and I seek for a greater sense of health and wholeness in body, mind, and spirit. In essence, we strive together to become more whole and complete as human beings. But together we often acknowledge that, in our efforts to become perfected, we are powerless to accomplish such an unattainable task on our own.

Christ’s admonition to become perfect is therefore an invitation to become perfected through His mediating grace. When we humbly and sincerely offer ourselves up to be made whole and complete in Christ, we become perfected *in* Him. Through an unfathomable act of love and grace, Christ accepts what we offer Him and *makes* us whole, through His infinite and incomprehensible Atonement. In and through the Savior is the *only* way that we can become truly perfected as we become “at one” with him.

You may have noticed by now that with each principle I have introduced, the key to transformative change is found in and through the Savior, Jesus Christ. His is the only path by which we can return to the presence of our Father in Heaven. In Alma 5 we catch a glimpse of what that glorious moment might be like when we stand once again in the presence of God. Alma asked:

And now behold, I ask of you, my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts? . . .

. . . Can you imagine to yourselves that ye hear the voice of the Lord, saying unto you, in that day: Come unto me ye blessed, for behold, your works have been the works of righteousness upon the face of the earth? [Alma 5:14, 16]

This passage of scripture always reminds me of how far I have yet to come in my efforts to reconcile myself to the gospel path. It bestows a magnificent promise of how the diligent, daily practice of our faith, coupled with Christ’s saving grace, can over time transform and perfect our very countenance and prepare us to meet God.

Principle Five: Take Time to Be Still

The glorious image of standing before God clothed in righteousness leads to a fifth principle that I believe is requisite for transformative change: to follow God’s simple and profound admonition to “be still” (Psalm 46:10; D&C 101:16).

Though dancers rely on movement as their medium of communication and expression, the medium of stillness can be equally as impactful. Moments of stillness in choreography can help to clarify, punctuate, provide perspective, and sometimes offer breathing space for both the dancer and the observer. Without moments of stillness as counterpoint, movement can sometimes lose clarity and perspective.

Likewise, stillness in our personal lives helps to provide perspective, clarity, and breathing space as we step away from the whirlwind of distractions that surround us and pause along our journey to recalibrate, reorient, and refocus our attention on what matters. In moments of stillness, distractions and uncertainties fall away. In moments of stillness, our hearts are changed and transformed. In moments of stillness, through the whisperings of the still, small voice, we come to know both the Father and His Son.

The Personal Commitment to Change

In closing, I would like to emphasize that the process of transformative change does not adhere to a prescribed clock or schedule. It is unique to each one of us and can only be realized through

our own personal commitment to growth and change.

I recently returned from a contemporary dance study abroad experience with two other colleagues and twenty-two BYU dance students. On our first day together, I invoked “The Path to Transformative Change” as a theme for our shared journey together, and I invited each student to actively seek opportunities for growth and transformation. Subsequently, I witnessed each of our amazing students’ commitment to seeking transformative growth and change on a daily basis. As faculty, we were often tutored and led by our students as they repeatedly demonstrated the depth of their commitment, not only to their individual growth as dancers but, more important, to their spiritual growth as children of God. Everywhere we went, dance teachers, tour guides, and festival directors noticed and commented on our students’ light, intelligence, curiosity, openness, and motivation to learn.

Brothers and sisters, like our study abroad students, who remained open to the possibility of life-altering change on a daily basis, all of us can find ways to be more open and receptive to the transformative change that the Lord requires of us—even that mighty change that transforms us into someone new. In our efforts to do so, I invite us all to examine our lives to determine how and in what specific ways we might (1) pay better attention to the things that matter and the things that need to change; (2) keep our feet firmly planted on the gospel path; (3) embrace and be tutored by our trials; (4) seek to be made whole; and (5) make time to be still. If we do so with an eye single to Jesus Christ, our Savior and Redeemer, we will experience that mighty change

of heart that leads to personal transformation of the highest order: to receive His very image in our countenances (see Alma 5:14).

I so testify in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Merriam-Webster.com, s.v. “crucible.”
2. Lexico.com, s.v. “crucible.”
3. Sheri L. Dew, “You Were Born to Lead, You Were Born for Glory,” BYU devotional address, 9 December 2003.
4. A version of this quotation by Ian Maclaren (pen name of Reverend John Watson) appeared in the 1897 Christmas edition of the *British Weekly*; see Garson O’Toole, “Be Kind; Everyone You Meet Is Fighting a Hard Battle,” Quote Investigator, 29 June 2010, quoteinvestigator.com/2010/06/29/be-kind.
5. Marjorie Pay Hinckley, in *Glimpses into the Life and Heart of Marjorie Pay Hinckley*, ed. Virginia H. Pearce (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 107.
6. Merriam-Webster.com, s.v. “perfect.”
7. See Frank F. Judd Jr., “‘Be Ye Therefore Perfect’: The Elusive Quest for Perfection,” in Gaye Strathearn, Thomas A. Wayment, and Daniel L. Belnap, eds., *The Sermon on the Mount in Latter-day Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 123–39.
8. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 1071; quoted in Judd, “Be Ye Therefore Perfect,” 124.
9. Johan Lust, Erik Eynikel, and Katrin Hauspie, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1996), 2:471; quoted in Judd, “Be Ye Therefore Perfect,” 124.