

Wandering and Wondering

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I would like to thank BYU for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today. I have had the amazing privilege of teaching at this wonderful university for almost twenty years. I love BYU and what it has meant for my family, my students, and me. Indeed, I would like to thank my family, my colleagues, and my students—but especially my family. I love you all very much. You have made this experience one of joy and happiness for me.

Today I would like to talk about wandering and wondering. The topic of this devotional has been percolating in my mind for a while. Steven Knott, who is bishop of the Tenth Ward in the Salt Lake Married Student Second Stake, asked me to speak to his ward about faith. He was concerned about the challenges being posed to the faith of some of the members. He did not want me to speak about the concept of faith, *per se*, but about those elements of our modern culture that challenge faith. Today I hope to expand a little upon the ideas I discussed with those remarkable students that day.

Faith and Reason

Let me start out with a little bit of a disclaimer. What we are going to talk about today is one way to address these issues, not the only way. Many of you will never struggle with

issues of faith, but some of you might. There are a variety of ways to approach these issues, and I am really only talking about the way in which I have attempted to play with them. I use the word *play* intentionally. *Play* implies spontaneity or seeing something afresh. Reflecting about and deepening faith is quite enjoyable and rewarding. Much like play, it can also refresh and revive you so that you can continue your many other responsibilities with more insight and vigor.

But learning about and living with faith is a personal journey. I expect that many of you will and should approach these issues somewhat differently than I have. What I hope you understand is that they can be addressed and that you can take what is beautiful and true about the gospel of Jesus Christ and live in a world that is not always friendly to faith. Tensions do exist between your faith and some of the norms of the world, but it certainly seems possible to find a balance between the two demands. To put it bluntly, you can know that Jesus is the Christ and that He restored

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His gospel through the Prophet Joseph Smith while at the same time immersing yourself in the wonders of the humanities, the social sciences, the sciences, and other disciplines of knowledge.

The dichotomy between faith and reason that is so popular today is in some respects a product of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the thinkers of the Enlightenment sought to attack organized religion as a means of loosening its grip on society. Enlightenment thinkers, such as the most ardent proponents of the French Revolution, launched an all-out war on religion because it stood in the way of the thorough remaking of society that they envisioned. In the process, a caricature of religion emerged that, to some extent, has persisted to this day.

What I hope you will understand is that seeing reason and faith as incompatible necessarily distorts both reason and faith. Indeed, the sooner you reject this false dichotomy, the quicker you can get started with the business of developing the full range of talents and abilities that will make you so valuable in the Lord's kingdom.

Two Models

So often all we see are these two mutually exclusive alternatives. However, there are often other ways to approach a question or problem. Let me illustrate this with a story.

I like to run, and there is a small group of runners here at BYU, with a branch in Salt Lake City, that we call the 8-Minute Gang. We have run all over this state together and have participated in several races. The first marathon run by one of the members of the 8-Minute Gang was the Deseret News Marathon. The Deseret News Marathon is run on July 24 in Salt Lake City and follows the route of the pioneers down Emigration Canyon. It is a brutal run—so brutal, in fact, that one member of the 8-Minute Gang simply joins us at the mouth of Emigration Canyon to

carry our water on the sun-drenched Foothill section of the course. The heat saps all of your energy, and the relentless pounding of the steep, downhill course turns your quadriceps into ground beef.

On this particular day our brave runner from the 8-Minute Gang made it as far as the corner of 13th East and South Temple (three miles before the finish), at which time he pulled off the course and collapsed onto a shaded lawn. Another member of the gang and I encouraged him to get up—and to get up soon—before his legs seized up. Eventually we helped him up, and he uttered the words that now live in 8-Minute Gang lore: “I can't walk and I can't run, but I can shuffle.” And shuffle he did until the finish line. Shuffling was in essence an option we hadn't considered until faced with the necessity of either dropping out or starting to run again.

Similarly, modern society most often provides us with the mutually exclusive options of being either faithful or rational. However, we have many more interesting and intriguing possibilities before us.

The Lord has furnished us with two models to help us cope with the tension we often face between faith and reason. These two models take the form of the wanderer and the wonderer. Both of these types appear prominently in our scriptures and provide us postures we ought to consider assuming as we confront the challenges of living in a modern world. I want you to notice that as we combine the models of the wanderer and the wonderer, we can actually carve out another way to live in a world that often forces a contrived set of choices upon us.

The Wanderer

The first model is that of the wanderer. The wanderer is an individual or people who are not completely and wholly comfortable in this world. They know that this world is only a passage to another world. Consequently, these

individuals never become too “at home” here in the world because they know their real home is somewhere else. Examples of wanderers abound in the scriptures. Abraham, Moses, the children of Israel, the Nephites, the Jaredites, and even our own pioneer history all emphasize wandering.

In perhaps one of the most poignant and poetic passages in the Book of Mormon, Jacob, the brother of Nephi, states:

I conclude this record, declaring that I have written according to the best of my knowledge, by saying that the time passed away with us, and also our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers, cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation, in a wilderness, and hated of our brethren, which caused wars and contentions; wherefore, we did mourn out our days. [Jacob 7:26]

This is not aimless wandering. This is a description of wandering as a separation from what is familiar or comfortable. It is a wandering designed to take the individuals or people out of the situation in which they find themselves so that the Lord can teach them the gospel and make sacred covenants with them. The wandering wrenches them out of the comforts, habits, and routines that can dull their senses and fixate their desires on the mundane. The wandering removes the residue of the world from off of them and creates openings for Heavenly Father to teach them His gospel.

We are often likened to wanderers and even admonished to act as such. It is perhaps in this vein that we could read the discourse on faith that Paul sent to the Hebrews. In Hebrews 11 Paul recounted the tremendous acts accomplished through faith and the trials suffered by those who believed. He then said in verse 38, “(Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.”

These were individuals who were different from the world and who resided in places that made the attractions of the world less immediate to them. We are not asked expressly to wander “in deserts, and in mountains,” but we are asked not to become too comfortable here. This is not our home. It is with this type of awareness in mind that the political theorist Michael Walzer wrote, “And so the wilderness had to be a new school of the soul” (*Exodus and Revolution* [New York: Basic Books, 1985], 53). Wandering on this earth for our appointed time is our “school of the soul.”

The Wonderer

However, we can only learn from this school if we take the initiative to enroll and to reflect on the meaning and splendor of its lessons. The model of the wanderer is not sufficient by itself. For this reason the second model is that of the wonderer. Here also we have numerous examples after which to pattern our lives: Adam, Lehi, Nephi, the apostles John and Paul, and the Prophet Joseph Smith. But perhaps the example I love the most comes from the consummate wanderer and wonderer: Moses. Moses established his credentials as a wonderer early. In the Pearl of Great Price we have the account of Moses’ grand vision. There are two critical parts in this vision that apply to the idea of wonder.

Moses’ reflections produced this perceptive phrase: “Now, for this cause I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed” (Moses 1:10). To have a deep sense of wonder, we must recognize the limits to our own understanding. So often we are quick to think that we already understand how the world works. Moses’ realization that “man is nothing” made it possible for him to make real progress. He did not start with the assurance of what he thought he already knew but with the understanding that there is much more to learn from a source that seems to have so much

more wisdom and knowledge than he had previously thought possible or understood.

What did Moses do with this enriched understanding? The answer appears in Moses 1:30, when Moses seized the full import of his new understanding and asked the questions that go to the very heart of wonder. This verse states: “And it came to pass that Moses called upon God, saying: Tell me, I pray thee, why these things are so, and by what thou madest them?”

Once again these two questions are at the center of wondering. When we stare up at the night sky and see the brilliance of the stars or when we hold a baby in our arms for the very first time or when we contemplate on the death of a loved one, we cannot help but wonder why these things are so and by what they were made. These two questions form the core of all human wondering and questioning up to our present day.

Becoming Wanderers and Wonderers

So what does wandering and wondering do for you? What sorts of perspectives should a productive merging of these two postures impart to you?

Seek Intelligence

First, you should acknowledge that the gospel of Jesus Christ does not—and this I must emphatically say *does not*—require you to check your intelligence at the door. Think of what the Prophet Joseph Smith wrote during his imprisonment in Liberty Jail:

The things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity—thou must commune with God. How much more dignified and noble are the thoughts of God, than the vain imaginations of

the human heart! None but fools will trifle with the souls of men. [HC 3:295; letter, 25 March 1839]

You cannot contemplate “the things of God” without some distance between you and the world and without a stance of wonder and awe. Furthermore, we do not shy away from the hard work of thinking and contemplating. It is not our heritage. Parley P. Pratt, B. H. Roberts, and literally hundreds of others have pushed us as a people in our short history to think and to think profoundly.

My Grandfather Patterson was a missionary in the Eastern States Mission in 1927 when Elder B. H. Roberts was president of that mission. Elder Roberts had an intensive six-week school with which he prepared his missionaries for the rigors of missionary life. Elder Roberts cared deeply about his missionaries and wanted them to develop the spiritual, intellectual, and physical gifts that would help them succeed. He pushed them very hard to think about the gospel and to develop the ability to preach it and defend it. My grandfather recorded in his journal what I think is the essence of the work required of us to learn the gospel. On January 17, 1927, he wrote:

School started out as per schedule and we have been following the schedule all week, and it certainly put one’s nerves on edge, for my head has felt like a boiler factory. But it was worth it just to hear Pres. Roberts talk.

The next day, January 18, he recorded: “School went along as schedule[d], even if my head did hurt.”

January 19: “School as usual. Head still hurting.”

January 20: “School as usual. Head still hurting.”

Now, lest you think this ends with my grandfather’s head exploding, he recorded on January 21, “Just had school till noon, had the rest of [the day] to catch up on our loafing.”

We can and should do the hard work of thinking and engaging with those who have considered similar questions within the academic disciplines; it is part of the charm of wondering. When it comes to doing the hard thinking, though, Latter-day Saints start from the premise that there is more than just knowledge to be gained. Latter-day Saints, with their stance as wanderers, know that there is a reality beyond the present that gives thinking and questioning a genuine purpose. The Book of Mormon states in 2 Nephi 9:28–29:

When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish.

But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God.

Value Gospel Insights

There is a second perspective we gain as we blend the stances of wanderer and wonderer. As you encounter the secular world, you will hear representations made against religion, God, communities of believers, and many other aspects of faith. As you encounter such representations, your stance as a wanderer and a wonderer should already have prepared you to scrutinize carefully the assumptions of those who make only the worst representations about faith. As a wanderer, you should not feel completely at home with the fads and trends in thinking that you see in the world. You should already have some misgivings about them. As somebody committed to wonder, you can continuously pursue knowledge about the heavens and gain insights and understanding that many in the world choose never to achieve.

For example, how many individuals do you know who get tripped up on the idea of evil or why bad things happen to good people? Many of the current negative representations

of religion make assumptions about God, nature, and the heavens that students and followers of the restored gospel do not make. The idea of premortal existence and the choice that we made to come to earth and learn how to make and keep covenants provides us with a perspective on evil that most people simply ignore. Our gospel-aided insights do not keep us from being sad at the presence of evil, but they do help us to see that it is not completely and utterly senseless and cruel of our Heavenly Father to have put us here.

Be Careful in Your Assumptions

Third, wandering and wondering should also make you careful about the assumptions *you* entertain about your own faith. The assumptions that lurk in the background of your thinking exercise a powerful influence, and if you are not careful and self-reflective, they may sometimes guide you to the wrong place. Seeing yourself as a wanderer humbles you and helps you avoid turning your own ideas into idols. Wandering brings with it meekness, and wonder supplies the enthusiasm to call upon your Heavenly Father as you seek to understand Him and His plan.

For example, when you hear the word *prophet*, what are the descriptions that jump into your mind and shape your judgments? How many of you think that the Lord was constantly holding onto the Prophet Joseph Smith's elbow and whispering into his ear during his waking and even his sleeping hours? If your standard assumptions or understanding of a prophet—or any Church leader, for that matter—are more rigorous than what the Lord expects, then you set yourself up for disappointment and maybe even anger. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said in the April 2013 general conference:

Be kind regarding human frailty—your own as well as that of those who serve with you in a Church led by volunteer, mortal men and women. Except in

*the case of His only perfect Begotten Son, imperfect people are all God has ever had to work with. That must be terribly frustrating to Him, but He deals with it. So should we. And when you see imperfection, remember that the limitation is **not** in the divinity of the work.* [“Lord, I Believe,” *Ensign*, May 2013, 94; emphasis in original]

Looking with Wonder to Our True Home

There is much that we can gain from adopting the stances of a wanderer and a wonderer. As wanderers we gain a critical perspective on the categories of thinking that pervade a world that seems increasingly hostile toward faith. As wonderers we embrace the beauty and mysteries of our journey here and fulfill the design of the Thirteenth Article of Faith: “If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.” We *seek* after knowledge, gifts, and wisdom because, according to Brigham Young, “We are trying to be the image of those who live in heaven; we are trying to pattern after them, to look like them, to walk and talk like them” (*JD* 9:170).

These are indeed lofty aspirations, and they are the aspirations of the wanderer and the wonderer—the person who is not at home here but who wonders often about this home and the destination to which he can be fitted.

The late Elder Neal A. Maxwell said:

The restored gospel is buoyant, wide, and deep—beyond our comprehension. It edifies, whether concerning divine design in the universe or stressing the importance of personal chastity and fidelity. Only meek disciples can safely handle such a bold theology. [“Encircled in the Arms of His Love,” *Ensign*, November 2002, 16]

We can repurpose the tension between the world and such a “bold theology” by taking the best of what the wanderer and the wonderer have to offer us. We can creatively use the examples of wandering and wondering to blaze a reliable and exhilarating path back into the presence of our Heavenly Father.

I leave you with my testimony of the beauty and truth of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.