

“On Staying Power”

L. TOM PERRY

I will never lose the feeling of awe that comes over me when I enter this great building and gaze upon this vast sea of faces, the students of Brigham Young University. To me it is overwhelming to see all of you gathered here together and realize the great responsibility we both have—you, to your committed course of study and everything else that goes with being on your own in a college setting, and me, to help provide useful guidance and counsel to you. I hope you know of my love for each of you. I hope you feel of my concern for your welfare. I do care about you and want the best out of life for each of you.

As I pondered this assignment, I discovered in my raw materials file an article entitled, “On Staying Power.” It was written by John Wooden, the legendary coach for UCLA, and printed in the *Wall Street Journal* on April 23, 1986. It reads in part:

Like most coaches, my program revolved around fundamentals, conditioning, and teamwork. But I differ radically in several respects. I never tried to get my team “up” for a game emotionally, I never worried about how our opponents would play us, and I never talked about winning.

I believe that for every artificial peak you create, you also create valleys. When you get too high for anything, emotion takes over and consistency of performance is lost and you will be unduly affected when adversity comes. I emphasized constant improvement and steady performance.

I have often said, “The mark of a true champion is to always perform near your own level of competency.” We were able to do that by never being satisfied with the past and always planning for what was to come. I believe that failure to prepare is preparing to fail. This constant focus on the future is one reason we continued staying near the top once we got there.

I probably scouted opponents less than any coach in the country. Less than most high school coaches. I don’t need to know that this forward likes to drive the outside. You’re not supposed to give the outside to any forward whenever he tries it. Sound offensive and defensive principles apply to any style of play.

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Rather than having my teams prepare to play a certain team each week, I prepared to play anybody. I didn't want my players worrying about the other fellows. I wanted them executing the sound offensive and defensive principles we taught in practice.

To me, success isn't outscoring someone, it's the peace of mind that comes from self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best. That's something each individual must determine for himself. You can fool others, but you can't fool yourself. [Wall Street Journal, April 23, 1986, p. 39]

From the philosophy of this great coach, John Wooden, there are three principles I would like to discuss with you here today. The *first* is to develop a pattern in your life of consistently doing the best with the talents given you by our Father in Heaven. *Second*, subscribe to basic principles that are always appropriate for any situation or season of life. *Third*, develop character, rather than worry about your reputation.

Principle Number One

Develop a consistency in your lives of always trying to do the best with the talents you have. One of my favorite scriptures is found in the eighth chapter of Psalms.

O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! who has set thy glory above the heavens. . . .

When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;

What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. [Psalms 8:1, 3–5]

I guess this scripture appeals to me because I like to think of myself as a junior angel with the power and opportunity of an eternal being. I am absolutely amazed as I watch the growth

and development of the next generation in our family. I study the emergence of each of our grandchildren, and I marvel at how different each one is in appearance and personality, even though they all come from a common heritage and a similar environment.

Let me describe my three oldest grandsons from each of the families of my three children. The son of my eldest daughter is a student. He leads his class, he is very disciplined, he schedules himself very carefully. He is consistently goal-oriented. I remember how frustrated I used to become when I would baby-sit. I would gather the children around me and read them a story before they retired to bed. The clock would strike eight o'clock, and my grandson would announce to the others that it was time to go to bed. He wouldn't allow me to even finish the page, not even a sentence. Eight o'clock is the established bedtime, and that was it.

My son's eldest boy is our great debater. He has a sound argument supported by numerous facts for everything he doesn't want to do. His reasoning is often brilliant. He also has an attention span for things he enjoys doing that is most uncommon for a child his age. He is unusually fascinated with animal and insect life. I have watched him sit by the hour observing a spider disposing of a fly entrapped in its web.

The son of my youngest daughter has a fascination for anything mechanical. A screwdriver in his hand is almost a lethal weapon. When he had just learned to walk, I took him on a tour of Temple Square to show him the beautiful flowers, trees, and buildings. He had no interest in them whatsoever. He wanted to spend his time trying to find every sprinkler head on the grounds to test them and see if they were screwed in tightly.

All three grandsons spring from the same family tree, but, oh, how different each of them will be in appearance and talent as they grow to maturity.

It is the same with each of us as creations of our Father in Heaven. We have been given an abundance of talent, beauty, and ability. Lack of progress can never be blamed on the lack of raw material. Richard L. Evans once wrote:

We know of no one in life who isn't an Important Person. We know of no man on the street (or in the gutter, for that matter) who isn't a child of God with the same rights and with the same relationship to his Father in heaven as all the rest of us have.

*We know of no one, young or old, from infants to elderly individuals, whose past or whose potential we would want to appraise as being unimportant. We know of no one we might see in any public place—on subways or busses, or walking in shabby shoes—or any boy selling papers, . . . who doesn't have an inestimable, unknown potential, here and in the hereafter. [Richard L. Evans, Jr., *Richard L. Evans—The Man and the Message* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, Inc., 1973), p. 304]*

What is needed, then, is for us to make this mortal experience one that is rewarding and fulfilling by developing a consistency in doing our best with whatever talents the Lord has blessed us with. I was thrilled with the talk Peter Vidmar gave in the priesthood session of general conference after he had successfully won his Olympic gold medals. His theme was that the Lord had blessed him with a talent. It was his responsibility to make himself a champion. His formula was simple. He spent fifteen minutes longer each day perfecting his routines than any of those competing against him. The multiplication of those extra fifteen minutes daily gave him the edge and prepared him for winning the gold medals in the Olympics.

Principle Number Two

Subscribe to basic, tried-and-true principles. Just as Coach Wooden taught that it was fundamental never to give the outside to any forward who tries to drive around you, there are basic principles of life we can always live by.

One of these principles is integrity. Integrity is tantamount to good character. It is the one trait that reaches all facets of our life and touches each aspect of our personality.

The Lord loves those who have integrity. He said about the Prophet's brother Hyrum Smith, "And again, verily I say unto you, blessed is my servant Hyrum Smith; for I, the Lord, love him because of the integrity of his heart, and because he loveth that which is right before me, saith the Lord" (D&C 124:15).

What is the meaning of integrity? We can find several definitions in the dictionary: (1) rigid adherence to a code or standard of values; (2) moral soundness, especially as it relates to steadfastness to truth, purpose, responsibility, or trust; (3) moral and ethical strength; (4) the quality of being honest; (5) the quality of being whole, complete, undivided.

We can describe a person of integrity, therefore, as a person who is honest and genuine, trustworthy and honorable. He is loyal, truthful, upright, virtuous, fair, and consistent. A person with integrity is faithful, incorruptible, praiseworthy, reliable, and steadfast.

We have not been left without abundant evidence of the blessings that follow those who have integrity. In the Old Testament there was Job, described by the Lord as a man who was perfect and upright.

As Job suffered untold trials and tribulations, his wife said to him, "Dost thou still retain thine integrity?" (Job 2:9). Even with all of his problems and challenges, Job sinned not (see Job 1:22). And the Lord still described him thus: "There is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil. . . and still he holdeth fast his integrity" (Job 2:3).

When Job's friends complained of all the hardships he suffered, he said:

All the while my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils;

My lips shall not speak wickedness, nor my tongue utter deceit.

God forbid that I should justify you: till I die I will not remove mine integrity from me.

My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go. [Job 27:3–6]

Job invited judgment from God so “that God may know mine integrity” (Job 31:6). Job’s conscience was clear, for he knew he was honest and upright in all of his endeavors. He would never compromise his integrity.

It was the Savior, himself, who declared, “He that doeth truth cometh to the light” (John 3:21). Throughout our history we have honored those who would serve with honesty and integrity. Every American applauds the honesty and integrity of Abraham Lincoln when he trudged miles to return a customer’s change.

Lincoln said at one time, “I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true; I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live by the light that I have” (Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* [Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1972], p. 246).

Lincoln also said, “Stand with anybody that stands right. . . . And part with him when he goes wrong” (*Speech*, Peoria, Illinois, 16 October 1854). Lincoln was so wise that he knew there was no freedom for any man while another man was held a slave. No man today could doubt the honesty and heart of this great man. He charmed men with his integrity and nobility of soul. His life was spent in serving humanity, and his example bears record that honor is an essential element in building a great nation.

There are times when we have watched with alarm as leaders in our community, state, and nation have lost their popularity and their ability to function because of their failure to be honest and honorable.

Our thirteenth article of faith begins with the statement, “We believe in being honest.” We do not believe in honesty merely as a

matter of policy. It is far more important than that. Honesty is a principle of salvation in the kingdom of God.

I will always be grateful that my tenure as a General Authority reaches back to the time when N. Eldon Tanner was a member of the First Presidency. He was recognized throughout the United States and Canada as “Mr. Integrity.” There was never any question about a Church contract being valid so long as President Tanner had approved the action. Many times I sat in financial meetings where staff members proposed questionable actions that might be considered common practice in a country in which we were doing business. President Tanner quickly and absolutely turned them down because they did not conform to his definition of honesty. And that’s what he expected in all of our Church dealings.

He said this:

*The integrity of which we speak is not impossible to attain. In fact, we should all be convinced that it is far easier to emulate the example of our Savior than it is to follow Satan, whose path leads us away from integrity and into darkness and misery. There is no happiness in sin, and when we depart from the path of righteousness we begin to do those things which will inevitably lead us to unhappiness and misery and loss of freedom. [“Integrity,” *Ensign*, May 1977, p. 17]*

Elder Faust describes integrity as “the light that shines from a disciplined conscience. It is the strength of duty within us” (James E. Faust, “Integrity, the Mother of Many Virtues,” *Ensign*, May 1982, p. 47).

Moses gave us the following counsel: “If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth” (Numbers 30:2).

And Elder Faust reminds us that

The power of keeping an oath was manifested by Nephi, who held Zoram, the frightened servant of Laban, to keep him from fleeing. Dr. Hugh Nibley has written: "Nephi, a powerful fellow, held the terrified Zoram in a vise-like grip long enough to swear a solemn oath in his ear, 'as the Lord liveth, and as I live' (1 Ne. 4:32), that he would not harm him if he would listen. Zoram immediately relaxed, and Nephi swore another oath to him that he would be a free man if he would join the party. . . .

. . . As soon as Zoram made an oath unto us that he would tarry with us from that time forth . . . our fears did cease concerning him." [Faust, p. 47]

I learned early in my business career that dishonesty is almost like a disease. It requires a great deal of medication to effect a cure. I hate to admit it, but in my earlier business experience, every time I exercised compassion in giving a person a second chance after catching them in a dishonest act, I caught them later in a repeat performance. It almost seemed as if they had to hit the bottom and suffer severe punishment before there was any hope of administering a cure.

I am sure that one of the great blessings of enrollment in this university is that you have committed yourself to live by a prescribed Code of Honor. Each of you, as you enroll at Brigham Young University, promises by signing your good name on an entrance application that you will keep all of the requirements of the school's Honor Code. You promise that:

I will live the law of chastity. I will live the Word of Wisdom. I will respect the property rights of others. I will not become involved in drug abuse. I will comply with all university regulations. I will respect the personal rights of others. I will be honest in all my behavior. I will live the standards of the Church. I will observe the high standards of taste and decency. I will help others fulfill their responsibilities under the Code of Honor. I will observe standards of dress and grooming.

It is vitally important that we are honest in our acts and adhere to these standards. You signed a pledge! Your integrity is now at stake. Most of you will have the courage to live by the high standards required here. You will emerge with a habit of being honest and trustworthy. It will be the highest distinction you can achieve from your schooling at Brigham Young University. You will distinguish yourself along all avenues of life as one who can be trusted without question. This integrity, which you can develop and strengthen here, is of infinite and eternal value.

A few of you will violate the Code of Honor and either be discovered or voluntarily confess to the violation. Either course will be hard to handle, but how much better off you will be than those who lie and cheat their way through school. They will leave here with a disease. Someday it will be discovered. The longer it takes, the more devastating it will be to them. If you have a problem, correct it now! The longer you wait, the more deeply the disease of dishonesty infects your soul, and the greater its damage can be to your eternal nature.

It was Brigham Young who said:

Simple truth, simplicity, honesty, uprightness, justice, mercy, love, kindness, do good to all and evil to none, how easy it is to live by such principles! A thousand times easier than to practice deception! [DBY, p. 232]

May we all live to say as Job said, "Till I die I will not remove mine integrity from me" (Job 27:5).

Principle Number Three

Develop character. *Webster's Dictionary* defines character as three distinctive traits: behavior typical of a group or person, moral strength, and reputation. President David O. McKay relates an experience of standing in a sculptor's yard in Florence, Italy. There he observed unbroken, irregular pieces of

granite from which the sculptor would create a work of art. In the yard he also observed a magnificent figure, a statue of David, carved over 400 years ago from pieces of stone as crude as those seen around the yard. He then compared the carving of the stone to the carving of a soul and asked the question, “Is it going to be a deformed one, or is it going to be something admired and beautiful for time and throughout all eternity?”

He reminds us that it is our responsibility to carve out our own lives, to carve out the character we would like to have, and that our tools are our ideas and our thoughts.

It has often been said:

*Sow a thought, and you reap an act;
Sow an act, and you reap a habit;
Sow a habit, and you reap a character;
Sow a character, and you reap a destiny.*

[Quoted by Samuel Smiles in *Life and Labor*, 1887]

Man becomes ultimately what he thinks and does. Habits become the vehicle molding his character. What kind of character and destiny are you after? Our acts are the outgrowth of our beliefs and our thoughts. Good habits are not acquired by just resolves, but are developed in the workshop of our daily lives. They are fashioned in often uneventful, commonplace routines of life, and acquired by practice.

President Ernest L. Wilkinson once said:

Good character is not something to be obtained by ease and indulgence, or by something socially agreeable. It cannot be acquired by absorption or by proxy, or on the auction block. It is a reward derived from honest trial in overcoming difficulties. We grow by mastering tasks which others consider to be impossible.

Thus, every day you are forming habits that will be part of your life forever. The principles of morality, sincerity, honesty, and integrity are

worth all of the effort it takes to make them an integral part of your personality and character. Samuel Johnson, one of England’s famous authors, wrote, “The chains of habit are generally too small to be felt until they are too strong to be broken” (*International Dictionary of Thoughts* [Chicago: J. G. Ferguson Publishing Co., 1969], p. 348).

Habits are not made or broken easily. It takes desire, repetition, and time to form them, whether they be good or bad.

Many years ago, when the railroad was finally crossing the country regularly, President Brigham Young said to a group of Church members:

We want the Saints to increase in goodness, until our mechanics. . . are so honest and reliable that this Railroad Company will say, “Give us a Mormon elder for an engineer, then none need have the least fear to ride, for if he knows there is danger he will take every measure necessary to preserve the lives of those entrusted to his care.” I want to see our elders so full of integrity that they will be preferred by this Company for their engine builders, watchmen, engineers, clerks and business managers. [JD 12:300]

The prophets through the ages have counseled us and encouraged us to build the type of character that would be entirely trustworthy and responsible in anything we do. Paul warned the Galatians:

Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.

And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.

[Galatians 6:7–9]

John Wooden concludes his article in this way:

I always taught players that the main ingredient of stardom is the rest of the team. It's amazing how much can be accomplished if no one cares who gets the credit. That's why I was as concerned with a player's character as I was with his ability.

While it may be possible to reach the top of one's profession on sheer ability, it is impossible to stay there without hard work and character. One's character may be quite different from one's reputation.

Your character is what you really are. Your reputation is only what others think you are. I made a determined effort to evaluate character. I looked for young men who would play the game hard, but clean, and who would always be trying to improve themselves to help the team. Then, if their ability warranted it, the championships would take care of themselves. [Wooden, p. 39]

And so, my dear friends, the message I would like to leave with you today is to hold fast to those basic principles that are tried and true. Consistently develop your talents, hold fast to your integrity, and build your character. These are principles that will not depreciate with time. Why? Because they are God-given principles founded on eternal truths, and will endure through time and for all eternity.

It is as certain as life itself that real joy comes from partaking of the fruit that will never perish. Real tragedy comes from following a path that only leads to heartache and misery. God has revealed his will to mankind. He has charted a course that will lead us back to the joy of his eternal presence. Of this I bear solemn witness, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.