

Line upon Line: Finding Joy in Progress

DOUGLAS F. PRAWITT

A couple of months ago when I was asked to speak at today's devotional, I was instructed to visit the university photographer's office to have a picture taken for use in publicizing this event. During the course of the picture taking, one of the student employees asked me what I teach here at the university.

I answered, "I'm an accounting professor."

After a short pause she said, "Oh, so it's going to be a boring devotional!"

I promised her I wouldn't talk about accounting and that I would do my best not to be boring, and she promised that she would be here—so, I won't name names, but, good sister, I hope you're out there!

When I was a child, my mother would invariably call out to me as I walked out the door, "Douglas, remember who you are!"

I answered, "Okay, Mom," and off I would go.

There were times in my youth when challenges and temptations arose when I made certain choices that were critically important to my personal growth—mainly because I did not want to disappoint my mother. I knew she loved me. I knew she would love me no matter what I did, but I knew what she expected of me. When I did make mistakes, she freely forgave and never withheld her love. Instead, she

reminded me of who I am, encouraged me to move forward, and gave me the strength to do better.

But, looking back, I don't think I truly and deeply understood just who it was that I was supposed to remember that I was!

In May of 1984 I was finishing the last full day of my mission to the wonderful people of Uruguay. My shoes were worn, my feet were calloused, and my 100-percent polyester suits had taken on an almost mirror-like shine. Some of you might remember those—we called them our "steel-wool" suits. People had to shield their eyes when missionaries stepped out into the sunlight! I have to say that for my two sons who are offering the prayers today, the suits they took on their missions are much nicer than the missionary suits of thirty years ago. Well, back to the story. My bags were packed and I was in the mission home preparing to catch my flight home the next day.

As I waited for my final interview with my mission president, I was reflecting back on my experiences—the highs, the lows, the joys, and

Douglas F. Prawitt was the Glen Ardis Professor of Accountancy at BYU when this devotional address was given on 19 July 2011.

the sorrows. I had worked hard! I had given it my all. But at that moment I was focused on my shortcomings—the things that I wished I had done better. In the middle of my reflecting, President Waldo P. Call invited me into his office. He immediately asked me how I felt about my mission.

I told him that I had worked hard, that I had given it everything I had, but that I wished I could go back—go back in time. I would be so much more effective if I could just do it all over again.

His answer did not comfort me much at the time. He said, “No, you wouldn’t.” And then he went on to explain: “If you could turn back the clock, you would do things the very same way. You wouldn’t have had the experiences that you’ve learned so much from—you would have to start all over again.” And then he finished with a rhetorical question: “That’s the point of it all, isn’t it?”

I pondered that counsel, but at the time I did not fully understand that it held one of the keys to a fulfilling and joyful life.

I had worked diligently; I had put my whole heart into my mission. But, at least for a time, I let the fact that I was not as capable at the beginning or the middle as I had become toward the end diminish my appreciation for the life-changing lessons I had learned and undermine the joy I could and should have experienced on completing an imperfect but honorable full-time mission.

In the succeeding years since that time—perhaps especially in the past few as I have served as bishop of my home ward in Springville—I have learned a different and, I think, clearer view of the nature and purpose of life. I have developed a deeper understanding of how our Father in Heaven sees you and me, our weaknesses and our shortcomings, and even the mistakes we make along the way. This perspective has made my life so much more joyful and so much more fulfilling! I hope my thoughts may be helpful to some of you.

Let’s start with some basics. Elder L. Tom Perry said in the October 2006 general conference:

There are two purposes for life in mortality. The first is that we might gain experiences that we could not obtain in any other way. The second is to obtain tabernacles of flesh and bones. Both of these purposes are vital to the existence of man. We are now being tried and tested to see if we will do all the things the Lord has commanded us to do. These commandments are the principles and ordinances of the gospel, and they constitute the gospel of Jesus Christ. Every principle and ordinance has a bearing upon the whole purpose of our testing, which is to prepare us to return to our Heavenly Father and become more like Him. [“The Plan of Salvation,” *Ensign*, November 2006, 71; emphasis added]

Note the first purpose—to “gain experiences that we could not obtain in any other way.” Let’s consider that thought for a moment. Instead of sending us here to go through this difficult and challenging earthly existence, where our loving Heavenly Father knew we would suffer and make mistakes, why didn’t He just gather us all around and teach us what we needed to learn? I believe John Stuart Mill, the great British philosopher and economist, touched on an important principle when he said, “There are many truths of which the full meaning cannot be realized until personal experience has brought it home” (“On Liberty,” chapter 2 [1859]). There are simply things we need to experience in order to understand.

You’ll also note that Elder Perry said that this life is a probationary period—a period of testing or trial. If we prove ourselves during this time, we will be welcomed back into our Father’s presence, where He will bless us with all that He has. But, as Jacob warned the people of Nephi, “Wo unto him that has the law given, yea, that has all the commandments of God . . . and that transgresseth them, and that wasteth

the days of his probation, for awful is his state!" (2 Nephi 9:27).

These are gospel truths. We have been both promised and warned. But understanding just who we are and what it is that we are to prove during our probation is important both to our success and to the joy that we will experience along the way.

Some people I've encountered seem to believe that we are here to prove to God, to everyone around us, and even to ourselves just how perfect we are—that we can and do live all of the gospel principles to their fullest, right from the start, never faltering!

There is danger in such a prideful perspective. Such a view may make us reluctant to admit our mistakes. When inevitably we do fall short, it becomes difficult for us to square our life view with the fact that we have weaknesses and have committed sin. It makes it hard for us to see clearly and acknowledge just where we are on the path of progress. It leads us to harshly judge and condemn ourselves and at the same time rationalize how and why our actions really don't disqualify us. It can lead us to try to hide our sins, which serves only to shade them from healing light. It can lead us to judge *others* harshly, crowding out the ability to develop the crowning virtue of charity.

Perhaps instead the Lord expects that we acknowledge that we are weak, that we have much to learn through the experiences we have, and that we make mistakes, and then prove to Him that we will repent and put our whole heart into doing better. *That we are here to humbly learn and grow and to make changes and turn to Him as we go is a liberating truth.* With such a view we will be more inclined to acknowledge and even accept what we are and where we are in our progress at any given point. Instead of trying to cover our sins, we will be inclined to search ourselves, to seek out where we fall short, and to reach out for help in moving forward. And, instead of perpetually berating our-

selves for past shortcomings, we can rejoice in forward movement.

As a concerned and loving father, Alma the Younger carefully explained the plan of salvation and the laws of justice and mercy to his son Corianton, who had fallen into serious transgression. Alma explained that, as a result of the fallen state of mankind, "there was a time granted unto man to repent, yea, a probationary time, a time to repent and serve God" (Alma 42:4).

We see every day in the world around us that the natural order of things is for offspring to grow and to learn from their experiences and, eventually, to become like their parents. And we have been taught by prophets that this is an eternal principle—it is one of the purposes for our earthly existence.

The missionary guide *Preach My Gospel* teaches:

God is the Father of our spirits. We are literally His children, and He loves us. We lived as spirit children of our Father in Heaven before we were born on this earth. We were not, however, like our Heavenly Father, nor could we ever become like Him and enjoy all the blessings that He enjoys without the experience of living in mortality with a physical body. [PMG, 48; emphasis added]

Having a deep understanding of this principle is so important! Armed with this truth, we can more fully understand how our Father in Heaven sees us, and in turn we can see ourselves more clearly: "We are literally His children, and He loves us."

Those of us who are parents know what it means to love our young children—we know just how deep and committed that love truly is! We love our children more than they can possibly understand. We would do anything in our power to help them to learn and to grow and to become happy individuals, experiencing joy, *fulfilling their potential.* But we understand that

they are not yet fully developed, not yet comprehending all the principles they will eventually need to know—perhaps not yet having the maturity or strength to perfectly live the principles they *do* understand, not yet having the depth that will come through enduring trials and challenges. And of course we do not reject them just because they are not yet completely mature or developed—we love them *and we know what they can become*.

Not long ago a youth in my ward came to my office for an annual interview. In the course of our discussion I asked this young man why he thought Heavenly Father wants us to live the principles of the gospel and how He feels when we fall short. He didn't even pause—his answer was, "God has the right to tell us what to do, and He's angry when we don't do it."

I tried to teach this good young man that the scriptures and our modern prophets suggest a different perspective. I tried to paint for him a picture of a loving Father standing with His arms stretched out, pleading with us to live the principles of the gospel to the best of our ability, so that He can bless us.

The Savior asked His disciples: "If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent?" (Luke 11:11).

Then He brought the lesson home: "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give good gifts, through the Holy Spirit, to them who ask him" (JST, Luke 11:14).

There is such beauty in this! The relationship that exists between loving earthly parents and their children is a model for us to understand how our Father in Heaven sees us! Except, of course, that His love is more perfect and complete than that of even the best earthly parents.

We are God's sons and daughters. He is literally the Father of our spirits. He loves each of us. He wants you to grow and develop and learn so that He can bless you and so that you

can eventually become like Him. Please do not let yourself believe that you are an exception!

He will encourage you, even plead with you, to get back on your feet when you stumble, to try, try again. And He will cleanse you and heal you if you will turn to Him.

The Savior taught that the first and great commandment is to "love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." He taught that "the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." (Matthew 22:37, 39; see also verses 33–39.)

Let's focus on the second of the great commandments for a moment. How are we to love our neighbor? As we love ourselves. But if we don't love ourselves very much—if we fall prey to harsh and excessive self-criticism, if we are constantly condemning ourselves for our shortcomings and denying who we really are—how much good will it do to love our neighbors in the same way?

We all know people who seem to constantly take a negative tone and who seem to have a cutting and judgmental attitude toward everything and everyone. And, on the other hand, we all know people who are full of "long-suffering" and "love unfeigned" (D&C 121:41), who are full of kindness and forgiveness, and who refuse to condemn others.

I believe that there is a great underlying truth in Christ's injunction to love others *as ourselves*—the reality is that you must love yourself in order to be able to be filled with love toward others. We can and must love ourselves for *who* we are even if we are not completely satisfied with *what* we are or *where* we are at the present. We can be loving and kind and even merciful with ourselves even while being fully and deeply committed to the knowledge that we can and must do better. When we do this, we will find greater tolerance and patience and love not only for ourselves but also for others. We can develop greater charity. And therein is peace and joy.

I share the following experience with permission. A husband and father in my ward requested an interview with me. He confessed that he was struggling with an addiction to pornography. He desperately wanted to put his destructive behavior behind him, but he had not been able to do so. He began to pour out his heart, explaining how the roots of this terrible habit were in his childhood. But in the middle of this outpouring he stopped abruptly and said, seeming to be almost angry, “No! I will not make excuses. What I am doing is wrong. It is evil, and nothing can justify it.” He cut himself short, and then he went on to express concern that there were two sides to him. He told me of his feelings and worries that *he* himself might actually be evil.

I told this good brother, this beloved spirit child of our Heavenly Father, that, yes, he needed to repent and overcome, but that he also needed to quit tearing himself down. He needed to remember who he is—a son of God! “You are *where* you are,” I told him. “Accept and acknowledge that. But you must also acknowledge and accept *who* you are.” It was important that he not leave room for justifying his behavior—that he not rationalize or convince himself that somehow his actions were not destructive or contrary to the principles of righteousness. But at the same time, if he would not allow himself room to understand the roots of his problem, how could he hope to overcome it? If he allowed himself no room for understanding, no kindness, no mercy, how could he truly know and remember who he is and why he is here? And without this, how could he develop the determination to undertake and persevere in the difficult but vital task of overcoming?

Like many who become caught up in Satan’s snares, this good brother had heard Lucifer’s whispered lies, and in his guilt and shame he had begun to believe them. Satan would have us believe that when we do wrong, it is over—that we have irrevocably forfeited our promised

blessings. “What you have done is too sinful, too ugly for you to ever be fully restored to your full potential,” he might whisper. “After all, you are a returned missionary, you have made sacred temple covenants, you are a husband and father, or you are a wife and mother, and look what you have done!” In this way he would have us become caught up not only in a web of destructive sin but also in a self-reinforcing cycle of denying who we really are and why we are really here. That cycle results in self-loathing and discouragement and ultimately in the inability to move forward.

Is it not emblematic of his essential deceitfulness that the very being who tries to chain you into soul-destroying patterns then whispers to you that you are worthless because you have done the very things that he has urged you to do?

I did my best to encourage this good brother, to give him hope. I promised him that the Atonement of the Savior was still available to him, as it is available to each of us. I promised him that his *full potential* as a child of God was still available to him if he would repent. I asked him to work toward remembering who he is, to learn to understand and love and eventually even forgive himself.

Some of his Church privileges were suspended for a time—with the sole intent of helping him to heal. I asked him to meet with a therapist who could help him understand his weakness and why, from his childhood, it had become so consuming. Together we formulated goals and plans that would, with faith and prayer, help him to eventually understand and overcome and move forward on the path to returning to his Father in Heaven—renewed and cleansed and healed.

Over time I saw the light of hope return to this brother’s eyes. The process was not easy, and he was not perfect in his efforts at first, but he found immediate peace and joy in the *process of moving forward!* After months of learning and struggling and progressing, the

day came when his temple recommend was returned to him. And we rejoiced together.

In his October 2006 general conference address, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland implored:

To all of you who think you are lost or without hope, or who think you have done too much that was too wrong for too long, to every one of you who worry that you are stranded somewhere on the wintry plains of life and have wrecked your handcart in the process, this conference calls out Jehovah's unremitting refrain, "[My] hand is stretched out still." [Isaiah 5:25; 9:17, 21]

Elder Holland continued:

His is the pure love of Christ, the charity that never faileth, that compassion which endures even when all other strength disappears [see Moroni 7:46–47].

I testify of this reaching, rescuing, merciful Jesus. ["Prophets in the Land Again," Ensign, November 2006, 106–7]

Brothers and sisters, fellow children of our loving and merciful God, if there is serious sin in your life, acknowledge and accept that fact. Understand that you are not here to prove to the Lord or to anyone else that you would never make mistakes; rather, you are here to *repent and give your all to serve Him*. Go to the Lord in sincerity and faith and plead with Him for mercy and help. Go to your bishop and get moving forward again on the path of progress.

Even if we are free from any such things, as we still struggle to overcome our persistent, petty weaknesses, every day can feel like a continual struggle. I know from personal experience that sometimes progress can be discouragingly slow—there are frustrations and setbacks and disappointments along the way. Sometimes it can even be difficult to tell whether or not we are actually winning the battle.

But I have found that a key to finding joy in daily living is to know this: If you are engaged

in the daily struggle to overcome—fully engaged—if you are trying with everything you have, you are winning! And with the Lord's help you will prevail.

Even if you are not yet perfect, even if there are areas in your life that are in real need of improvement, if you are sincerely pushing forward, you are achieving the purpose for which you are here and you can find joy in that. The Lord will help you. He may not immediately make your path easy, because doing so might actually hinder your progress and development and happiness in the long run. But He *will* be with you, He *will* help you as you refuse to give up, as you call upon His name and continue to try to give Him your whole heart.

A few years ago, my mother was diagnosed with a terminal illness. Knowing that she would pass through great agony and that death would inevitably take her, I arranged a trip to the sacred Church sites in upstate New York—just the two of us. It was my way to create some one-on-one time and to say good-bye. At one point, as we were driving together toward the Sacred Grove, I reached out and took her hand. I told her how much I loved her and how grateful I was for all that she had given me, all she meant to me. I told her how sorry I was for the little things that I had done along the way that had caused her disappointment or pain. I will never forget what she said. She squeezed my hand and, her eyes glowing, said, "Oh, Doug, you don't understand, do you? I forgave you those things before you ever did them."

Oh, the love of a parent for her imperfect child! I testify that our Father's love is like that—except it is even more complete. He is your Father. Regardless of where you have been or where you are now, He wants you, as His child, to learn and to grow from your experiences—even from the mistakes that He knew you would make. He wants you to properly put them behind you through the miraculous gift of the Atonement. He wants you to experience *joy* in your progress toward Him.

And He wants you to complete that difficult but infinitely rewarding journey, safely and successfully.

May each of us learn to rejoice in the grand opportunity that has been afforded us to experience this earthly existence, to have trials and challenges that can lead to great personal growth and progress, to learn from our mistakes, and to put them behind us through repentance. May we understand and remem-

ber who we really are. May we openly and honestly acknowledge to ourselves and to God where we are in our own personal path of progress, wherever that may be. May we engage in the continual process of identifying where and how we most need to change, and then may we *get to work*, finding daily joy in *moving forward*, line upon line, precept upon precept. In the holy name of Jesus Christ, amen.