

On Change and Becoming: Thoughts from a Reluctant Grower

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At some point after my first couple of years at BYU, a brother in my ward, who was retired from the BYU religion faculty, said, “Hey, you could speak at a devotional!”

I don’t know why he thought I might be qualified for that, but I shrugged it off, thinking that if I sang often enough, I would surely be exempt from speaking. Just recently I had the thought that since I have been at BYU for ten years, I might need to lay low to dodge the devotional bullet.

However, six weeks ago I received an email from Vice President Matt Richardson asking if I would be willing to speak at this devotional. I reluctantly replied that I would accept the challenge, though I am not sure that “happily” would describe my attitude.

As I prayed for guidance on a topic, this thought came to me: “I am a reluctant grower.” I had never used that term before, though it seemed to suit me well, so I can only guess that the Spirit had coined that phrase just for me.

Needing clarification on that phrase, I went to Google for a precise definition of *reluctant*. It said that *reluctant* is an adjective that means “unwilling and hesitant; disinclined.” Its synonyms include being “loath to, unwilling to, disinclined to, indisposed to; not in favor of, against, opposed to.” Its antonyms include being “willing” and “eager.” The word *reluctant* originated in the mid-seventeenth century from the Latin word *reluctant*,

which means “struggling against,” and from the verb *reluctari*: the prefix *re-* means “expressing intensive force” and the suffix *luctari* means “to struggle.” As a side note, the word *reluctant* is worth eleven points in Scrabble.

Am I, as this definition says, unwilling, hesitant, and even disinclined to grow? I will refer to myself, since I am confessing that I am a reluctant grower, but feel free to insert your name where applicable.

Am I Reluctant?

What is it that sometimes makes me hesitant to face a growing opportunity? I am not against hard work. I bore both of my children while pursuing a doctorate, working two jobs, singing operas on the main stage at Indiana University (one of the top music schools in the country), and maintaining a 3.9 GPA. No, I am not opposed to hard work.

Is it that I am not wanting to participate in activities? I am more than willing to fulfill my callings, go visiting teaching, take a dinner—that likely my good husband expertly cooked—to another family, or participate in my ward’s day

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of service. No, I am willing to do things that are asked of me.

Am I afraid of the process of growing? Many times while sitting in Relief Society I will hear a sister say, “I prayed for patience” or “I prayed for charity.”

I think, “Are you crazy?! Do you not know what challenges come when you pray for Christlike attributes?”

They then proceed to tell of the tragic circumstances that occurred to teach them those lessons.

You won’t catch me praying for godlike qualities. It is hard to grow; it can be painful to grow. Thus it seems my proud and stubborn heart is, indeed, hesitant to grow.

Plants, Pots, and Limitations

As I was thinking of growth, my thoughts naturally turned to plants. When a potted plant gets root-bound, it has run out of room in its current pot. The roots cannot continue to grow, the soil is compact and depleted, and the plant is stagnant in its current state. When a plant is repotted, the roots are broken up, fresh soil is added, and the plant is placed in a larger pot.

Sometimes the plant does not immediately take to its new condition. I have a plant in my office that was recently repotted, and it looks rather sad with its yellowing, drooping leaves. It may take a while for the plant to adapt, to send out new roots, and to resume growing. However, in time the growth, which is so subtle in the moment, can be monumental. Eight and a half years ago we received as a housewarming gift from a dear friend a plant in a pot that was about a foot in diameter. The same plant is now in a pot just over two feet in diameter. The growth was slow—but exponential over time.

The Difference Between Doing and Being

We might say that Jonah of the Old Testament was a reluctant grower. When he received a call to preach repentance in Nineveh, he fled from the Lord, was tossed into the raging sea, was swallowed by a whale, and was then vomited onto land three days later. At that point he *still* needed to go to Nineveh to preach. And so he went.

When Jonah told the people of Nineveh to repent, they did—with their whole hearts. Yet Jonah, who had just experienced the Lord’s mercy, did not accept their penitent state and sat back to watch Nineveh be destroyed. He was then chastened by the Lord for his disregard for the souls of men.

Jonah was reluctant in many ways. But had he not been, he could have avoided the whole whale and vomiting episode and just gone straight to Nineveh.

Laman and Lemuel were clearly reluctant growers. They were even visited and rebuked by an angel, yet seemingly five minutes after an angel left, they resumed their complaining.

In 1 Nephi 3:31 we read:

And after the angel had departed, Laman and Lemuel again began to murmur, saying: How is it possible that the Lord will deliver Laban into our hands? Behold, he is a mighty man, and he can command fifty, yea, even he can slay fifty; then why not us?

They were slow to learn and quick to forget the lesson.

In 1 Nephi 16 alone, Laman and Lemuel repeated three times the cycle of murmuring, being humbled, and repenting. The last time was after Ishmael had died and Ishmael’s daughters (Laman’s wife and Lemuel’s wife) were mourning. Laman and Lemuel even came to the point in which they conspired together:

And Laman said unto Lemuel and also unto the sons of Ishmael: Behold, let us slay our father, and also our brother Nephi, who has taken it upon him to be our ruler and our teacher, who are his elder brethren. [1 Nephi 16:37]

That is definitely reluctance to grow.

A common thread with these examples is that while each person was willing to *do* something, they were not willing to *be* something. Jonah did go to Nineveh and preach repentance. Laman and Lemuel did go back to obtain the brass plates, and they did go to the promised land. But none of them appear to have changed who they were.

I have learned that Heavenly Father does not just want me to *do* something; He wants me to *become* something. When I am striving to become, my heart will turn toward the things that I must do.

Elder David A. Bednar taught:

The essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ entails a fundamental and permanent change in our very nature made possible through the Savior's Atonement. True conversion brings a change in one's beliefs, heart, and life to accept and conform to the will of God . . . and includes a conscious commitment to become a disciple of Christ. ["Converted unto the Lord," Ensign, November 2012]

Lessons from My Life

Let me share a few opportunities for growth that Heavenly Father has thrust upon me.

An Unexpected Mission Call

I had always wanted to serve a mission. I grew up in Orem, Utah, and went to college in Arkansas. As I awaited my mission call, I was sure that with all of my language training and with my vocal skills I would be assigned to an exciting, exotic place—maybe even a place where I could make connections to later begin my fabulous operatic career!

I was at the University of Arkansas, where a mission call was an anomaly among my peers, so many waited with anticipation to see where I might go. I was assigned to the Utah Ogden Mission, speaking English.

I was almost embarrassed to tell anyone, but of course I went. Heavenly Father needed me to learn that in order to serve Him, I needed to be humble, and here was a small dose of humility just to get me started.

I spent most of my time on my mission in very small towns in Idaho and Wyoming, and I *love* the people from my mission! I learned so many important things and grew my testimony like never before. And that mission location directly affected my post-mission plans and my subsequent life course, including where

I eventually went to graduate school and met my husband.

An Invitation for Greater Spirituality

A few years ago I was invited to serve on the BYU Women's Conference Committee. You may have noticed the 15,000 women on campus last month. That really had been my only experience with Women's Conference prior to this invitation. But I felt strongly about the divinity of women and was happy to help with the planning.

It did not take long for me to see that this was not a typical university assignment. The committee was composed of women from the campus, from the community, and from the Church general boards. I found myself resistant to being a part of this company of women. What did I have to offer? I was not like them: I did not have a wardrobe of cute, coordinated jackets, and my hair was very long and somewhat unruly—not in the accepted style!

As the semester went on, and as these remarkable women accepted me with open arms, I began to realize that what I really desired was to be like them. I wanted to delve into the scriptures as they did and draw upon the Spirit as they did. I had to painfully look into myself to see that I was reluctant to be repotted. But if I was to become a woman of God, I needed to allow myself to become more and to be uprooted; I needed to dig a little deeper. I softened my heart and allowed myself to grow, with great gratitude to those beautiful examples on that committee. And I believe my hairstyle is getting closer.

A Study Abroad Experience in Vienna

The BYU School of Music sponsors a study abroad program in Vienna, Austria, each spring term. I had never had a study abroad experience as a student or as a faculty member, and I had never been to Austria—or even to much of Europe. I really wanted this experience for myself and even more for my family.

In August 2015 I emailed the new director of the School of Music to let him know I would like to lead this program sometime.

He immediately replied, “How about this next spring term?”

Again I hesitated. That was only eight months away! I had no idea how to do anything in a study abroad program, but I knew that it would be a lot of work. And I did not speak German. What was I thinking?

But my husband, Steve, who was also anxious for this experience, said, “Reply *yes!*”

As I expected, it was a lot of work to prepare for the program. However, the experience was even more than I had hoped for. For a musician, Vienna—the home of Mozart, Schubert, Johann Strauss, and Beethoven, among others—is a paradise. We heard wonderful concerts and operas. We saw beautiful and historical places throughout Austria, Italy, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and England. My teenage children not only experienced Europe but learned that they could face challenging and unknown situations and could learn to adapt—including adapting to haircuts from non-English-speaking Turks. They saw the Church as an international congregation in Vienna and as a branch of twenty in a village in England. All of the participants gained confidence and grew parts of their own testimonies. In addition, we added nineteen wonderful BYU students to our family circle. It was life changing.

I cringe to think that my hesitation might have robbed us of those experiences and of our individual opportunities for growth.

How to Achieve Maximum Growth

Even as I approached this talk, I thought, “Perhaps I can revamp a previous talk. That won’t be too hard.”

That was not the case. Heavenly Father had yet another painful lesson that I needed to learn about myself: I needed to embrace growth in order to become who He has in mind.

When I fear growth, I must keep in mind 2 Timothy 1:7, which reads:

For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.

And also, as stated in 1 John 4:18:

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.

I cannot fully take advantage of the Atonement of Jesus Christ when I fear or when I am unwilling, because then I am doubting our Savior and the power of His Atonement. But I can repent and grow and eventually be made perfect through the love of our Savior.

When a plant is struggling with growth, we often give it a dose of Miracle-Gro or some other plant food. Miracle-Gro is composed of basic yet fundamental elemental nutrients—nitrogen, potassium, and phosphate.

What might our spiritual Miracle-Gro consist of? What are the spiritual elemental nutrients?

Prayer

There are many scriptural examples of the power of prayer, but I was drawn to Enos in the Book of Mormon. When Enos began to ponder “the words which [he] had often heard [his] father speak concerning eternal life” and his “soul hungered,” he knelt before his Maker and cried in prayer for his own soul (Enos 1:3–4). He prayed all the day long and through the night, and he was changed through long and earnest prayer. If you are not sure where to start on your own journey, begin to pray.

Scripture study

Nephi taught us:

And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins. [2 Nephi 25:26]

The very purpose of the scriptures is to bring those who read and study them closer to Christ.

Fasting

Fasting is another elemental nutrient. When Alma the younger and the sons of Mosiah were reunited after their very long missionary service, they rejoiced in the faithfulness and strength of one another. We read in Alma 17:2–3:

For they were men of a sound understanding and they had searched the scriptures diligently, that they might know the word of God.

But this is not all; they had given themselves to much prayer, and fasting; therefore they had the spirit of prophecy, and the spirit of revelation, and when they taught, they taught with power and authority of God.

Jesus Christ fasted for forty days and nights to prepare Himself for His ministry. Fasting with prayer endows us with the Spirit and with power from on high.

These very basic yet fundamental elements—prayer, scripture study, and fasting—will ignite our faith, nourish our souls, and give root for change and growth.

Humility Through Life's Hurdles

When a challenge is before us, it is not required that we conquer that challenge with ease. We may not even possess the skills to accomplish the task before us. All that Heavenly Father requires is prescribed in 3 Nephi 9:20: “And ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit.”

Elder Bruce D. Porter of the Quorum of the Seventy taught:

Those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit are willing to do anything and everything that God asks of them, without resistance or resentment. We cease doing things our way and learn to do them God's way instead. In such a condition of submissiveness, the Atonement can take effect and true repentance can occur. [“A Broken Heart and a Contrite Spirit,” Ensign, November 2007]

Having a broken heart that is willing to do the Lord's will does not make us weak or insufficient.

Instead it helps us to be humble in our mortality and to recognize that we need heavenly help to face life's challenges. We are promised in Ether 12:27:

And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.

It is our humility and reliance upon God that give us the ability to overcome and grow.

And here is one more reason why we need never fear any task that is laid before us:

Wherefore, be of good cheer, and do not fear, for I the Lord am with you, and will stand by you; and ye shall bear record of me, even Jesus Christ, that I am the Son of the living God, that I was, that I am, and that I am to come. [D&C 68:6]

I don't know about you, but when I am facing life's hurdles, I want and need to be strengthened by the Lord. I am grateful that He has promised that He will stand by me. And with that promise, I can exercise my faith and feel peace and security in letting my heart become broken in order to grow.

Returning Home Willingly

I do have a deep desire to be a disciple of Christ. And as Elder Bednar advised, we each must make “a conscious commitment to become a disciple of Christ.”

So just as I have confessed to being a reluctant grower, I now pledge to you—and maybe with you—and to my Heavenly Father that I do not choose to be like Laman and Lemuel. Instead I choose to be like Nephi, to “go and do” (1 Nephi 3:7) and, more important, to *become* what the Lord commands.

Ultimately, I am always grateful for the growth that comes from hard things. Just like my root-bound house plants, I have the need to let my compacted roots be broken up and be repotted

into rich soil that will allow me to stretch, be nourished, and become something more. I treasure the lessons I have learned through challenges, including what I have learned while preparing this address.

I know that my Heavenly Father loves me and that He loves you. I know that He sees fit to

help us become worthy to return to His presence someday. I am grateful for the Atonement of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Redeemer, which allows me to repent, change, grow, and correct my course so that I can willingly—not reluctantly—return to my Heavenly Father.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.