

Our Journey Through Mortality

J. MATTHEW SHUMWAY

I love words and word origins. One of my favorite words is *serendipity*, because it is one of those words that just rolls off the tongue. I know it's strange, but I get a great deal of pleasure saying certain words, and *serendipity* is one of them. *Serendipity* is defined as the occurrence and development of events by chance in a beneficial way. Its origin is attributed to Horace Walpole, an English poet and writer who coined the term from the heroes of the fairy tale *The Three Princes of Serendip*, who "were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of" (in letter to Horace Mann, 28 January 1754; quoted in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., 2000, s.v. "serendipity").

According to British-born author and Sri Lankan lexicographer Richard Boyle, the story of the three princes of Serendip is an old Persian or possibly Indian fairy tale about three princes from Serendip who, having been taught by the wisest men in the kingdom, are sent by their father on a mission of observation. They discover things by good fortune and sagacity (discernment or wisdom). For example, in one part the three princes use trace clues to precisely identify a camel they have never seen that has been lost by its driver. When the

driver asks if they have seen the camel, they say no, but they then ask the driver if his camel is lame, blind in one eye, missing a tooth, carrying a pregnant maiden, and bearing honey on one side and butter on the other. The driver is astonished that, having never seen it, they could know that much about the camel, eventually accuses them of stealing the camel, and has them arrested.

When they are brought before the emperor, he asks them how they knew about the camel. They explain how they deduced the characteristics of the camel from simple observations, and the emperor is so impressed with their wisdom and judgment that he not only spares their lives but also appoints them as his advisors and rewards them. The rewards, which were unsought, came serendipitously—not because they had been seeking them, but because they were in the right place at the right time and doing the right things. (See Richard Boyle, "The Three Princes of Serendip" [part 1] and "Serendipity and the Three Princes" [part 2], *Colombo [Sri Lanka]*

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Sunday Times, 30 July and 6 August 2000, www.sundaytimes.lk/000730/plus7.html#7LABEL1 and www.sundaytimes.lk/000806/plus6.html#6LABEL1.)

This reminds me of a statement expressed by former BYU professor and poet Arthur Henry King in his book *The Abundance of the Heart*, in which he stated:

If we aim at self-fulfillment, we shall never be fulfilled. If we aim at education, we shall never become educated. If we aim at salvation, we shall never be saved. These things are indirect, supreme results of doing something else; and the something else is service, it is righteousness, it is trying to do the right thing, the thing that needs to be done at each moment. [The Abundance of the Heart (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), 255]

I love this quote for two reasons. First, the sentiment it portrays focuses on process or means and not on ends. When I was an undergraduate student here many years ago, I took a summer job working for a very wealthy man. He was an interesting man and one, I must admit, I didn't like very much. However, he taught me something that I have never forgotten, and, like Arthur Henry King, it had more to do with process than with outcomes.

At one point in an orientation, someone asked him what he was worth or how much money he made. He took this opportunity to teach us a lesson. He told us that he had only a vague idea of how much he was worth or how much money he made, as neither of those were his primary goals. His goal was to deliver the best product in the most efficient way. He said that if you focus on the process, then the ends will come. In this case, the process was delivering a product and the end was a high income.

I decided to try and apply that principle to my schooling: instead of focusing on the end (grades), I would focus on the process (learning). I determined that if I could go into every class with the attitude that I was going

to learn as much as possible, and put forth the effort to do so, then I would be happy with whatever the outcome. Although I still had a vague idea of how I did in every class, I never again picked up my report card to see my final grades. Did I then get an A in every class? No. Were there classes that I was frustrated with? Were there classes in which I did not particularly like the way a professor taught? Was there an 8:00 a.m. art history class in which I accidentally fell asleep because they always turned out the lights? Yes. (And, by the way, I feel bad about falling asleep in that class to this day.) My grades did improve, but what I really gained was not improved grades but an increased love of learning and freedom from worrying about whether or not I would be judged as good enough.

The second reason I like the quote is the phrase "the thing that needs to be done at each moment." Life for me is just a series of moments. Most of these are normal, everyday moments that are difficult to differentiate one from the other—moments that we rarely reflect on or even notice. Nevertheless, there are moments in life when, like the three princes of Serendip, we are in the right place at the right time and when we need to do the right thing.

For example, I enjoy watching college football, and I have often heard it said that the outcome of a close and evenly matched game will be determined by just a few plays. Now, if the players knew what those plays were in advance, they could specifically prepare for them and put forth their best effort on just those plays. But they don't know which plays they will be. Because of that uncertainty, it's necessary for them to be fully prepared and to put forth their best effort all of the time—to be in the right place at the right time and doing the right thing in order to have the biggest impact. Those three or four or five plays in a game—or those five or 10 or 100 moments in life—will determine, to a large extent, the outcome.

In many cases we will not know what the crucial plays or moments will be until we can look back and analyze what happened. When we do the analysis, we may find that it wasn't the big plays or moments that made the most difference. President Gordon B. Hinckley, in the book *Stand a Little Taller*, said:

The course of our lives is seldom determined by great, life-altering decisions. Our direction is often set by the small, day-to-day choices that chart the track on which we run. This is the substance of our lives—making choices. [*Stand a Little Taller* (Salt Lake City: Eagle Gate, 2001), 13]

The choices we make fill in the details of our lives and determine who we will become. In ancient times cartographers often labeled large areas on their maps as *terra incognita*, or “places unknown,” because while the cartographers may have had a broad outline of the continents, they had little or no information about the details within. Similarly, as members of the Church, we have a broad outline of a spiritual map that provides information on where we came from, why we are here, and where we want to end up. This map is called the plan of salvation. It is within the plan of salvation that our lives are given and we obtain meaning.

I can't imagine not having such a blueprint for this life, and I will be forever grateful for the Restoration of the gospel; the Prophet Joseph Smith; my ancestors, who had the courage and fortitude to join the Church; and my parents, who taught me in the language and learning of the gospel. However, while the great plan of happiness does provide broad outlines for where we came from, why we are here, and where we are going, the details are less clear. Even with the insights gained from patriarchal blessings, current revelation, and modern-day prophets and apostles, we are still left with a *terra incognita*. I believe that for most of us here today, our spiritual maps have large territories labeled “places unknown”—

that is, we have some idea of the beginning and we know where we want to end up. The question is: How do we get there?

In a general sense, we do as Moroni counseled in Mormon 9:27:

O then despise not, and wonder not, but hearken unto the words of the Lord, and ask the Father in the name of Jesus for what things soever ye shall stand in need. Doubt not, but be believing, and begin as in times of old, and come unto the Lord with all your heart, and work out your own salvation with fear and trembling before him.

How do we “work out [our] own salvation,” or, keeping with the metaphor I have been using, how do we *map out* our salvation? How do we prepare for those moments in our lives when everything hangs in the balance, especially given the uncertainty of not knowing which moments will be the most important? How do we keep our perspective focused on the process of living the gospel? How do we integrate our lives into the gospel or the gospel into our lives in such a way that doing what's right at all times and in all places becomes habit? While the underlying principles are the same for all of us, the details will vary as we each journey into those unknown places and begin to fill in the details of our maps. As you continue on your journey in this life, I have a few suggestions that may help.

First: Show Up

Someone once asked the director/actor Woody Allen why he was so successful, and he told them that 80 percent of his success could be attributed to just showing up. I believe he meant that what made the difference was not just that he was there, but that he was there with the right attitude—as someone who was willing to learn, willing to work, and willing to start something that might be difficult, and then willing to come back the next day, knowing that it would be difficult.

My stake's welfare assignment is to go out to a Church dairy farm to do whatever is asked of us. This includes moving cows from one pen to another, branding, dehorning, fixing up and tearing down, cleaning, painting, and so forth. The work is generally not something most of us look forward to with great anticipation, but afterward we always look back on it warmly.

When we received our new stake calendar in December, we noticed that our ward's first assignment was on Saturday, January 3. This was relatively short notice and over a holiday weekend. We usually meet at the church about 7:15 a.m., have some doughnuts and hot chocolate (it's amazing what some of the youth will do for a doughnut), and head out about 7:30. We reach the farm about 8:00 and work for four hours. Some of you probably were not in the valley on January 3, but it snowed the previous night, and when we woke up we had close to a foot of snow on the ground. And it was cold. No members of the bishopric were able to go on this particular assignment, and we worried whether or not we would have anyone show up. But show up they did—we had 17 people show up, which is about what we always get, but that seemed like a lot for such a cold and snowy day on a holiday weekend. It was later reported to us by the Young Men president that the manager of the farm told him that any time he sees that a ward is coming from Elk Ridge, he never worries, because he knows that people from these wards show up ready and willing to work. I felt, probably unrighteously, proud of my ward for showing up.

Showing up, in this sense, equates to doing. One of my favorite scriptures is the entire book of James because it's about doing. For example, in James 1:22–25, James stated:

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.

For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass:

For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was.

But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.

Why is it so important that we show up? God doesn't really need us to do His will or His works. So why is it important? Because, as with all that God commands, He wants us to do it for our benefit. It is through doing the work that we become converted. In a recent missive to all of the faculty and staff, academic vice president John S. Tanner quoted the following from C. S. Lewis:

I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise. . . . The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite game. . . . I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious, minds, praised most, while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least. . . . Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible. . . .

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed. [Reflections on the Psalms (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), 94–95]

I had also never thought of praise in this way before, and, as I started to ponder it, I had one of those moments when clarity struck—everything God asks us to do is for our benefit, not for His.

I started to better understand King Benjamin's address to his people concerning how we are unprofitable servants. Even when we do what is right for the right reasons,

neither seeking nor wanting any reward, we are blessed—because the very act of doing what is right changes who we are for the better. We become more Christlike, which prepares us for eternal life—the greatest of all God’s blessings. Somehow, for some reason, I always thought that such blessings were exogenous to the process, but they are not. To me this is an example of heavenly serendipity—we receive a reward that was not sought because we were in the place we needed to be at the time we needed to be there and doing what was right. Christ also taught this principle when He said:

My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me.

If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself. [John 7:16–17]

The knowing doesn’t come in some intellectual way—it comes by changing who we are. I believe this is what Alma was talking about in Alma 5:14, when he said:

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?

Conversion to Christ comes through the mighty change in our hearts, and the mighty change in our hearts can only come from doing His will. Thus, my first suggestion is to show up.

Second: Recognize and Remember

Just a few verses later, Alma asked members of the Church:

And now behold, I say unto you, my brethren, if ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now? [Alma 5:26]

One of the things I learned as I went through graduate school and since I have been

teaching here at BYU is that we sometimes lean too much to our own understanding. Nephi warned us of this in 2 Nephi 9:28:

O that cunning plan of the evil one! O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! 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.

It is clear from everything we are told in the Church about education, including President Monson’s recent talk here in the Marriott Center, that Heavenly Father values an educated people. We have been told in scripture and repeatedly by prophets in this dispensation that we should gain as much education as possible. Learning—lifelong learning—is good. I don’t believe there is ever too much learning or too much education, but we also need to remember that education misused “profiteth [us] not.”

Simplifying it somewhat, I think that learning can have two outcomes for our spiritual journey here. First, it can humble us. I have been amazed that the more things I learn, the more things I realize I don’t know. Learning does require and leads to questioning, but it can do so in a way that is not destructive of one’s faith. A more dangerous outcome of learning is that it can lead from hubris to a discounting of eternal truths because they seem quaint or outdated; then to a trusting in the arm of flesh rather than in what current prophets and apostles tell us; and finally to dismissing as coincidence those tender mercies that we receive from the Lord.

Elder Bruce C. Hafen recounted the following story:

A few years ago, a university student related to his priesthood quorum a boyhood experience that happened just after he had been ordained a

deacon in the Aaronic Priesthood. He had lived on a farm, and had been promised that a calf about to be born would be his very own to raise. One summer morning when his parents were away, he was working in the barn when the expectant cow began to calve prematurely. He watched in great amazement as the little calf was born and then, without warning, the mother cow suddenly rolled over the calf. She was trying to kill it. In his heart he cried out to the Lord for help. Not thinking about how much more the cow weighed than he did, he pushed on her with all his strength and somehow moved her away. He picked up the lifeless calf in his arms and, brokenhearted, looked at it, the tears running down his cheeks. Then he remembered that he now held the priesthood and had every right to pray for additional help. So he prayed from the depths of his boyish, believing heart. Before long the little animal began breathing again. He knew his prayer had been heard.

After relating this story, the tears welled up in his eyes and he said, “Brethren, I tell you that story because I don’t think I would do now what I did then. Now that I am older, less naive, and more experienced, I ‘know better’ than to expect help in that kind of situation. I am not sure I would believe now, even if I relived that experience, that the calf’s survival was anything more than a coincidence. I don’t understand what has happened to me since that time, but I sense that something has gone wrong.” [“Is Yours a Believing Heart?” *Ensign*, September 1974, 52–53]

Is it any wonder that Christ taught us that we have to be as little children to enter the kingdom of heaven? I do not believe that the fellow in this story is alone in feeling the way he does. Too many of us sense that something has gone wrong in our lives. Why do we stop believing? Why aren’t the signs and signals from God clearer? Doesn’t God want us to know for a surety? Why should we have to struggle with discerning between God’s power and simple coincidence? Maybe this is a better question: Would a more direct manifestation of

God’s power cause us to believe in Him? But would that not eliminate our agency? Elder Hafen put it this way:

The Lord has used the highly visible forms of his power so sparingly—enough to leave us with clear witnesses but not enough to compel us to believe. . . .

What a careful balance has been struck between too much and not enough in the manifestations of divine power. How essential, then, to be willing to recognize the quiet evidences for what they are. [“Is Yours a Believing Heart?” 55]

My second suggestion is to learn to recognize the hand of the Lord in your life, to listen to the whisperings of the Spirit that can and will guide and direct your path, and to remember with childlike innocence those coincidences in life that brought you closer to God.

Third: Enjoy the Journey

Let’s go back to serendipity for a minute. In his book *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, John Barth said, “You don’t reach Serendib by plotting a course for it. You have to set out in good faith for elsewhere and lose your bearings . . . serendipitously” ([Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991], 13).

I am afraid that I was one of those people who set out for Serendib, or Serendip, and never seemed to get there. I thought that as soon as I reached the next milestone in my life I would be happy—as soon as I graduated from college, as soon as I got married, as soon as I finished graduate school, as soon as I completed my dissertation, as soon as I got my first real job, and so forth. Then one beautiful spring evening as I was walking down the stairs toward the Richards Building and enjoying a spectacular sunset, I had an epiphany: This was my life, and it wasn’t getting any better than it was at that moment. The Spirit whispered to me to quit looking forward to what might be and start making do with what is.

As I stood there feeling dumbfounded, I felt an enormous weight lift from my shoulders. Now, if you ask people who know me, they will probably wonder if I have in fact changed, but I have. I have been blessed in my life far beyond anything I actually planned for. Trying to do the right thing, even in places I had never planned on being, has given me unsought-after rewards so great that I am continually amazed at how the Lord has blessed my life.

Standing on those stairs, I realized that I had found Serendip and didn't even know it. For the first time in a long time, I felt at peace with who I was, with what I was doing, and with where I was. I knew then and have had it confirmed many times since that I am supposed to be here doing what I am doing. (Although I do think I will enjoy it much more when I am no longer department chair!) True joy comes from preparing to make and then actually making the right choices in the right places at the right times—and then not worrying about what might or might not happen.

In a recent talk, Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin told the following story about Elder Matthew Cowley:

When Elder Matthew Cowley (1897–1953) was first called into the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, President J. Reuben Clark (1871–1961) invited him into his office and counseled with him about his new assignment. President Clark was one of the great leaders and thinkers of the Church. He left a post as the United States ambassador to Mexico to accept a position in the First Presidency of the Church. He was a man long accustomed to bearing the weight of heavy responsibility.

As the meeting between Elder Cowley and President Clark drew to a close, President Clark said, "Now, my boy, kid [President Clark called all the members of the Quorum of the Twelve 'kid']—Now, kid, don't forget rule six." Elder Cowley asked, "What's rule six?" President Clark said, "Don't take yourself too darn seriously." Elder Cowley asked, "What are the other five?" President

*Clark said, "There aren't any." ["Lessons Learned in the Journey of Life," *Ensign*, December 2000, 12; see *Matthew Cowley Speaks* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 132–33]*

Life is a serious business, but not so serious that we should not enjoy it, take the opportunities that have been given to us and make the most of them, and, as Elder Wirthlin counseled us in his last conference address, learn how to laugh. So my third suggestion is to enjoy the journey.

Fourth: Endure to the End

In Lehi's vision of the tree of life, the path to the tree is "strait and narrow" (1 Nephi 8:20). I don't know about you, but I have always envisioned the path as being on relatively flat terrain. While the scriptures tell us time and again the path is strait and narrow, it doesn't say anything about it being level. If my experience is any indication, those who walk the path will be going down some steep inclines, up some rugged ravines, and across some raging rivers. It's not just that the mists of darkness make it difficult to see the path—the path you are on will not always be smooth or level and your journey will not always be easy. Nevertheless, staying on the path is the only way back to our Heavenly Father.

I want to be able to say, as Paul told Timothy: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).

Enduring to the end means remaining faithful to the laws and ordinances of the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout your life. It is a fundamental requirement for salvation in the kingdom of God. Enduring to the end is not just a matter of passively tolerating life's difficult circumstances; it requires faithfulness to the end. Obviously this is not an easy task, but it was never meant to be easy. Our life's journey is intended to be difficult, challenging, and ultimately refining. Otherwise we would not be pure enough to return and live with our

Father in Heaven and receive His eternal blessings. When you get to the end of your rope, don't let go—tie a knot and hang on until help can come. And I promise that help will always come.

In a beautiful talk on enduring, Elder Neal A. Maxwell gave the following advice:

Patient endurance permits us to cling to our faith in the Lord and our faith in His timing when we are being tossed about by the surf of circumstance. Even when a seeming undertow grasps us, somehow, in the tumbling, we are being carried forward, though battered and bruised. . . .

The customized challenges are often the toughest and the most ironical. For instance, King Mosiah was venerated of his people, yet, ironically, his sons became damaging enemies of the Church for a season. Nevertheless, his discerning people still esteemed Mosiah.

*Will we have that same perceptive tolerance for those being wrenched by a cruel irony? When, for the moment, we ourselves are not being stretched on a particular cross, we ought to be at the foot of someone else's—full of empathy and proffering spiritual refreshment. On the straight, narrow path, which leads to our little Calvarys, one does not hear a serious traveler exclaiming, "Look, no hands!" (See 1 Cor. 10:13.) ["Endure It Well," *Ensign*, May 1990, 34]*

Paul wrote of how, even after they had "done the will of God," faithful disciples had "need of patience" (Hebrews 10:36). How many times have good individuals done the right thing initially, only to break under subsequent stress? Sustaining correct conduct for a difficult moment under extraordinary stress is very commendable, but so is coping with sustained stress subtly present in seeming routineness. Either way, however, we are to "run with patience the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1), and it is a marathon, not a dash.

Anytime that I start to dwell on my difficulties in life, my mind turns to Joseph

Smith's experience in Liberty Jail and to what the Lord told him. These few verses simultaneously frighten me, make me feel guilty for dwelling on my inadequacies and tribulations, but ultimately give me hope:

If thou art called to pass through tribulation; if thou art in perils among false brethren; if thou art in perils among robbers; if thou art in perils by land or by sea;

If thou art accused with all manner of false accusations; if thine enemies fall upon thee; if they tear thee from the society of thy father and mother and brethren and sisters; and if with a drawn sword thine enemies tear thee from the bosom of thy wife, and of thine offspring, and thine elder son, although but six years of age, shall cling to thy garments, and shall say, My father, my father, why can't you stay with us? O, my father, what are the men going to do with you? and if then he shall be thrust from thee by the sword, and thou be dragged to prison, and thine enemies prow around thee like wolves for the blood of the lamb;

And if thou shouldst be cast into the pit, or into the hands of murderers, and the sentence of death passed upon thee; if thou be cast into the deep; if the billowing surge conspire against thee; if fierce winds become thine enemy; if the heavens gather blackness, and all the elements combine to hedge up the way; and above all, if the very jaws of hell shall gape open the mouth wide after thee, know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good. [D&C 122:5–7]

Wow. Can't you just feel the weight of the world pushing down on Joseph? Just reading that passage makes me grateful for my relatively insignificant problems, and I am pretty sure I don't want that much experience. Nevertheless, it is through such a refiner's fire that the Lord prepares us for those moments in our lives when we will have to stand strong, when we will have to keep the faith, and when we will have to endure. We really do not know when those moments will be, so we

always need, like good Scouts, to be prepared. Be prepared so that you can serve the Lord in those moments that will determine your fate. I believe that if we endure our experiences well, then the suffering, the pain, and the uncertainty, which are but for a small moment, will prepare us for greater things.

In the same section of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord gave us some more perspective when He stated, "The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he?" (D&C 122:8).

How can we not endure our short and relatively painless experiences when compared with Christ's incomprehensible suffering? Maybe we should think of it a little differently. Jesus Christ suffered greatly because He had to pay the price for all sin. And because He suffered for us, He understands our suffering, our pain, our grief. I believe that we have some of the experiences we do so that we may have increased empathy. Once you have traveled the steep and rocky

slopes on the path of life, your ability to help others safely negotiate the path increases, and God can use you.

Now, finally, let's read verse 9, which once again gives me hope:

Therefore, hold on thy way, and the priesthood shall remain with thee; for their bounds are set, they cannot pass. Thy days are known, and thy years shall not be numbered less; therefore, fear not what man can do, for God shall be with you forever and ever.

We really are here in mortality for such a short time. Knowing the plan of salvation is real will help keep the troubles, disappointments, heartaches, and trials we have in a proper perspective—an eternal perspective—a perspective that gives us hope in salvation through Jesus Christ. Please know that God loves you, He wants you to succeed, and He will be with you forever and ever. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.