

Both Feet Forward

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My father was a builder of big buildings, some well known. So when I returned from my two-year mission to Japan and wanted summer work, I ended up forty feet down at the bottom of an air conditioning shaft, stripping forms from freshly poured concrete. My captive coworker, Chuck, made the mistake of asking why I would “waste two valuable years like that.” I am sure he had no idea what he was in for, and I unleashed my abundance of missionary zeal.

At some point in our discussion I heard a noise overhead and saw the familiar silhouette of my father leaning over the shaft. What he said was a surprise: “Chuck, I don’t know what he’s saying down there, but I believe it is true. Now get back to work.”

This is for me the most treasured testimony my father bore, but I hope we can surpass that level of communication today. I don’t want you to go back to class thinking, “I don’t know what he was saying down there, but I believe it is true.” Instead I want to *persuade* you to rethink the way you communicate to others your feelings about your connections to heaven and the amazing blessings of what you know and what you feel.

Why persuade? Because “no power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood”—and I hold no position that grants me that kind of dominion over you anyway—“only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned” (D&C 121:41). I want to persuade you to consider another perspective that will help you follow the counsel of an apostle.

Elder David A. Bednar stood here in August and asked us “to sweep the earth as with a flood of truth and righteousness” in our online efforts (“To Sweep the Earth as with a Flood,” BYU Education Week devotional address, 19 August 2014, [lds.org/prophets-and-apostles/unto-all-the-world/to-sweep-the-earth-as-with-a-flood](https://www.lds.org/prophets-and-apostles/unto-all-the-world/to-sweep-the-earth-as-with-a-flood)). His devotional was historic in many ways. I was so delighted.

Elder Bednar’s first qualification for this effort was simple:

We are disciples, and our messages should be authentic. A person or product that is not authentic

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is false, fake, and fraudulent. Our messages should be truthful, honest, and accurate. We should not exaggerate, embellish, or pretend to be someone or something we are not. ["To Sweep the Earth"]

Following his counsel to be authentic will be more difficult for us, as central-culture Mormons, because for decades we have desired to honor the Lord by always putting our best foot forward. Look down at your feet, if you will. The problem is that nearly every mortal has two feet, and most require both of those feet to stand properly.

Over the past ten years I have regularly had the punishment and privilege of watching through a one-way mirror as focus groups discuss Mormons. The people in these groups were not just any people; they were selected for these sessions because their beliefs and actions demonstrated that they were likely to respond positively to the message of the Restoration. They were people who believe in Christ, who have their prayers answered, and who believe their relationships will endure beyond death, even if their particular faith doesn't teach that. Quite possibly they were those "who are only kept from the truth because they know not where to find it" (D&C 123:12). And yet these amazing people of faith, when asked to characterize us, said, in no particular order: polygamous, sexist, racist, and exclusionary.

The first impulse in that situation was always to leap into the other room and correct the misperception, but we had all agreed not to do that, and the experience of the professionals was that the conversation would have quickly disintegrated into "No, we're not."

"Yes, you are."

"No, we're not."

And so on. So we calmed ourselves and went on.

Now, there are points of history and evidence that can at least be used to argue for these erroneous perceptions, and there has been an exceptionally authentic response of

late by the Church to the issues of polygamy, race, and gender, but what is most troubling for me is not those perceptions. It is the widespread opinion that we exclude others from our faith, our communities, our sociality, and our love. How can that be an accurate viewpoint?

As we probed deeper into the experiences that generated this perception, we bumped into a very understandable cultural phenomenon. The first section of the Doctrine and Covenants identifies us as "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth" (D&C 1:30). I believe that statement and embrace it. If we take it as a reminder that we are the grateful recipients of the blessings of access to all revealed priesthood keys and ongoing revelation from heaven to guide our actions, then it is a humbling and awe-inspiring statement of our faith. Often though, particularly in testimony meetings, it is used as a contrastive statement of pride, exclusion, and misunderstanding, as if we are more righteous than others, as if we can monopolize truth, and as if being chosen makes us more beloved.

The first African American family moved into our neighborhood in 1965. My mother, as was her custom, baked fresh bread and went to visit the new family. I peered out the window for her return, anxiously awaiting her report. To her great credit, the fact that they were black didn't make it into the conversation at all. With genuine pleasure she exclaimed that they seemed like "such nice people for being nonmembers."

In my suburban east side Salt Lake City neighborhood, our social circle mostly consisted of either active members or what we called Jack Mormons, since at the time the handful of Catholics or Presbyterians in the neighborhood had been kept pretty much within polite waving distance. We had little daily interaction with those not of our faith, and my mother's surprise at their goodness affected me. I spent my youth thinking that

heaven was for Mormons and that all the other believers were destined for some other place. I told my Greek and Baptist schoolmates as much. I was a little Zoramite, climbing the Rameumptom in my Primary classes and praying, “And again we thank thee, O God, that we are a chosen and a holy people” (Alma 31:18), as if to add, “and the rest of Your children are not.”

Imagine my awakening as my work over the last thirty years in fifty countries has acquainted me with thousands of our Heavenly Father’s beloved children who are amazing and faithful souls. In Egypt I worked for months with Ahmed Sami, the producer of *Death on the Nile*. He was a devoted Muslim, a father, and a truly ethical businessman in a country ripe with corruption at its cultural and political roots. Without even knowing the word, he voluntarily tithed himself to the benefit of the poor. He spoke of many miracles and answered prayers. He often reminded me of Christ’s injunction to be “wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16). If I ever make it to the “entry queue” for the celestial kingdom, I expect him to be standing up there ahead, well in front of me, with the season-ticket holders.

While in Egypt we honored the promise the Church had made not to proselyte, but I have no worry for the state of Ahmed’s soul. Why? Because apostles remind us often of the Lord’s statement in 2 Nephi 27:20 that “I am able to do mine own work,” and the last two sections of the Doctrine and Covenants reiterate that the Lord has a plan for the redemption and exaltation of those who have died without the gospel and its ordinances (see D&C 137 and 138).

All of God’s children need to have an opportunity to hear the gospel, exercise their agency, and have access to the plan of salvation, or God would cease to be God. He lets us serve in our sacred responsibilities as missionaries both for our mortal trial and learning and to gather His elect, who hear His voice and doubtless

have particular service to render here and hereafter. So as we seek authenticity, it would serve us to remember that all men are children of our Heavenly Father and all “come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

Since the reality of *our* own weaknesses and continual striving to overcome our failings is obvious to all who observe us—trust me—others find us most authentic when we acknowledge that trailing foot as well and don’t just champion the best foot forward, pretending we have two “right” feet. I like this quote:

I love that man better who swears a stream as long as my arm yet deals justice to his neighbors and mercifully deals his substance to the poor, than the long, smooth-faced hypocrite.

I do not want you to think that I am very righteous, for I am not.

This same person also said, “There was one good man and his name was Jesus” (HC 5:401).

Though this sounds like a focus-group participant talking, it was actually Joseph Smith who said those words. He understood the value of acknowledging what I like to call “the state of striving” in any effort to persuade, lest we hold ourselves to a standard—with our protestations or our posts or tweets or pins—that any observer could call pride in self rather than love for God and man.

Please don’t assume that I am calling for a disclosure of all our personal failings anytime we desire to rejoice or for a mandatory review of our sins as a preface to our posts. We have all seen too much information online and cringed. I am simply asking that we make sure the pictures we present of ourselves have two feet walking toward God, reflecting His glory and not our own.

This has ramifications for the way we communicate to all those who share our values but not our membership. I was taught in Primary to interact with those not of our faith using

what we called “the golden questions”: What do you know about the Mormon Church? and Would you like to know more?

If we applied that advice in today’s social climate, would it work? Imagine using it on a personal interactive basis. Let’s say I boarded a plane, sat next to a fellow traveler, and declared: “Hi, I’m Scott Swofford. What do you know about me? Would you like to know more?” I am pretty sure a call button would be pressed and I would be relocated, if not removed from the plane.

The most authentic way to enter a gospel discussion is to first seek to understand. I have experimented with the following approach when seated on a plane: “Good morning. I like those shoes.” The dialogue is now underway on a positive note.

Eventually it gets us to “Is this flight out-bound or returning home for you?”

Inevitably they will ask me where home is, and I am lucky in that admitting I’m from Utah is like setting a timer on a predictable response. Three, two, one: “Are you Mormon?”

Now, I could launch into my memorized first discussion, but it is in Japanese, so instead I usually reply, “Yes. And you?” I then pay genuine attention to a lot of information about this new friend—their thoughts on faith, their struggles, and their current frame of mind. Then I am ready for the Spirit to direct the next move.

Am I encouraging timidity or restraint in opening our mouths? No. Am I celebrating weakness? Yes! The Lord said:

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. [Ether 12:27]

Clearly, weakness and the recognition of it, the humility that follows, and the application of faith in Christ are essential to our eternal

progression. Weakness is also the key to authenticity.

During the “I’m a Mormon” research we learned that the most powerful myth-dispelling force was personal exposure to the lives of our members. More powerful than any argument, firsthand knowledge was the secret weapon. When we met someone who held inaccurate beliefs, we would say, “Do you know any Mormons?”

The answer was usually something like, “Yes, one of our vendors is a Mormon.”

“Well, does he have two wives?”

“No.”

“Does he behave in a discriminatory way toward women or people of different backgrounds?”

“No.”

“Has he invited you to participate socially in his life?”

“Yes. We’ve been out to dinner.”

“So how do you explain this contradiction between your beliefs and your experience?”

“Well, he must be an exception.”

We learned that people need five to ten exceptions in their lives before they will adjust their misperceptions of Latter-day Saints, thus the profiles on Mormon.org—thousands of virtual, relatable, striving followers of Christ.

After those experiences provided me with a valuable clue about what makes us relevant to others, I came to BYUtv. We knew from our research that good writing, good drama, and powerful television draw at their most inspired levels on the capability of flawed characters, whether real or imagined, to accomplish amazing things. That is our story as humans. The Atonement takes the small and simple beings that we are and makes us heirs to “all that [the] Father hath” (D&C 84:38). We began as a team to craft such shows, striving to “see the good in the world” amidst all of our human flaws. If I judge our success by the letters I receive from some well-meaning Saints, we have ruined the channel. We try to take these comments into

consideration and then proceed carefully with our approved direction.

The most popular show when I arrived was a quilting show, Fons and Porter's *Love of Quilting*. The week I arrived it pulled 8,700 households. Now, following the counsel of our leaders and with an amazing creative and distribution family in place, some of our shows can be seen by a million-plus viewers in a week and receive sixty-three million digital views in a year. Many of those views are by those not of our faith, and we hear from thousands of them whose expectations of us were violated in the positive.

It is our weakness and our need to overcome sin that binds us to the Savior. In Luke we read:

Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican.

The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.

I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. [Luke 18:10–14]

Often bitter and gnashing voices focus on some personal weakness of Church leaders, both general and local, in an attempt to justify refusal to follow their counsel. I find these protestations, whether historical or current, to have the opposite effect on me. If these leaders can accomplish such virtuous, lovely things as humans and therefore flawed characters, then there is hope for me, a sinner. I have myself witnessed members of the ruling councils of

this Church make decisions that in no way aligned with what I knew their personal opinions to be because the Spirit of the Lord had wrought upon them otherwise. What more joyous witness can there be than knowing heaven is in charge? Those not of our faith resonate with the message of the gospel best when it is presented by messengers who jump in with both feet and acknowledge their striving state.

Authenticity also implies an attempt to speak in a situational language our audience can understand. A few years ago I had the opportunity to role-play with English-speaking MTC missionaries. I chose to play a husband who had just lost his wife. I decided to go easy on the missionaries, and after welcoming them to my "home," I spoke about my grief at the loss of my imaginary spouse and my sincere need to understand her whereabouts. I felt I had given them an obvious approach to take. "Man," I thought to myself, "I wish I had seen such a golden investigator on my mission."

Their fresh young faces looked up at me, and they opened their scriptures and began to enthusiastically launch into what was their most comfortable vehicle: the story of the Restoration. "In the spring of 1820 in upstate New York . . ."

I stopped them. "Now elders, listen to what I just asked and see if there is a more comforting approach." I repeated my deep yearning for knowledge about the state of the soul after death.

With even brighter smiles they began again: "In the spring of 1820 in upstate New York . . ."

And this time I just let them talk. You see, to them the story of the Restoration is so central, so relevant, that it was of course the answer. We would all agree that the words of Alma about the Resurrection that I wanted them to quote or the messages about the sealing power that I was hoping for would not be ours without the Prophet Joseph, but they were just a little too ready to use their new MTC squirt

guns to squirt the gospel on me and feel that they had done their job. I wanted them to also take responsibility for the absorption of that message. Their testimonies of Joseph Smith would be critical to my understanding as an “investigator,” but they were out of place in messaging hierarchy. If these elders had caught my situational questions and affirmed that their message had the answer I was seeking about my dear departed, I would have been happy to wade through any lesson on the Restoration, even in questionable Finnish or Tagalog or Swahili. Likewise, as we strive for authenticity, we need to listen and construct a message hierarchy.

The Savior could easily have taught “love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44) with a simple pronouncement, and He did so on occasion. He also used a much more engaging method: “A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves” (Luke 10:30). Now that is a terrific opening, of course belonging to the parable of the good Samaritan. Both approaches eventually arrive at the same place—love your enemies—but one follows a messaging strategy that I have seen work countless times in my career from behind the one-way mirrors.

I am aware that by advocating a change in our approach to the world I have perhaps created another “should,” and the sad reality is that “you should” can become the enemy of “I would.” I saw an effective illustration of this principle once. The presenter stood a life-size cardboard cutout of a Latter-day Saint in the front of the room and began to place Post-it notes on it to represent every commandment, responsibility, expectation, program, activity, area of emphasis, and worthy endeavor members of the Church are repeatedly asked to apply themselves to. The image of the person was quickly obliterated and overwhelmed. I feel that way often. The only way for me to find a way forward is to remember that the Savior found a way to make it all simple, as He was

so adept at doing. He took the mass of instructions, policies, commandments, and traditions and made them only two:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

This is the first and great commandment.

And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. [Matthew 22:37–40]

When I need a gut check in the decision-making process, I don’t always have with me the laminated card they handed out at the last leadership meeting. Instead I weigh my options against those two commandments.

It is clear that Jesus, for whom the answer to nearly all questions is love, surely loves us all. He loves the professor who came up with a perfectly good lesson plan thirty years ago and now that he is old “will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). He loves the ineffective politician. He loves the guy who asks you out once and then never calls again. He loves the roommate who steals your milk. He loves the people who know Him by names we cannot pronounce, who chant to Him, who dance for Him, who kneel five times a day on little rugs, or who touch a mezuzah at their comings and goings. He loves the primitive Amazon natives who enact familiar rituals, the origin of which they do not understand (but I do). He even loves Pharisees, although to be honest He was sort of tough on them during His mortal ministry.

That love is the answer to any procedural question because it dictates through the Spirit how we are to approach each specific child of God and each specific audience. It is different for each encounter, and following that pure love of Christ under the direction of the Spirit is the ultimate communications trump card. It is divinely authentic.

I leave you with three guidelines for putting both feet forward. Feel free to laminate these for your wallet—or just put them on a sticky note on your forehead.

1. If your virtues must be extolled, it is always better to have a third party do it. Really.
2. If doing it yourself is unavoidable, start by expressing love and genuine admiration for your audience. What will follow is then less likely to be offensive.
3. When in doubt, follow dear Nephi's example:

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the great goodness of the Lord, in showing me his great and marvelous works, my heart exclaimeth: O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities.

I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me.

And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins; nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted. [2 Nephi 4:17–19]

Brothers and sisters, I am a wretched man. My thoughts careen recklessly in and

out of the appropriate path. My family, my coworkers, and my bosses will attest that I am often irreverent and annoying. When I served as a bishop, a sister told me in an interview that I was not only glib—a word I had to look up—but that I also had perhaps “the shortest attention span on the planet.” Sometimes I think there is no hope.

It is not God who makes me feel that way in the middle of the night. Weakness and humility lead to hopefulness, not helplessness. But when I calm myself I know there is indeed a bright hope, because I know in whom I have trusted. I believe that if I just keep striving, keep repenting, and don't stop trying to love as He loved, then someday, maybe after a millennium of practice, I will be whole because of His atoning sacrifice for me.

Today, here in this gathering, I feel His love for you, though you are all also wretched in some way. I know His love will save you and me, and I know that about you because you know in whom you have trusted. I testify that you will go on, with both feet forward—the best foot and the real foot—to do mighty things in His name. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.