

Ordinary Lives, Extraordinary Miracles

LAWRENCE P. VINCENT

During my career as a professional opera singer, I spent months and sometimes years in preparation for an important concert or stage production. One thing was certain and unavoidable: the time would arrive when I had to stand on the stage in front of thousands of people and sing. This musical accountability was swift and very audible—to my credit or shame. Immediately I could see the quality of my performance reflected in the face of the conductor.

As we anxiously await and prepare for the hallmark events in our lives, it feels at times as if they will never arrive. We fantasize in anticipation of getting our first driver's license or graduating from high school, attending college, going on a mission, getting married, experiencing the birth of a child, and much more. Just as surely as these highly anticipated events will arrive and pass, so will the time of our mortality come to an end. As Jacob in the Book of Mormon recorded: It will pass "as it were unto us a dream" (Jacob 7:26).

All of us have dreams, aspirations, and solid goals. As we use our allotted days and years to bring them to fruition, there are six principles I have found that, when practiced, can dramatically affect the outcome of our lives. They can bring us many wonderful

blessings and even miracles that can build our faith and shape our lives in ways we never thought possible. Hopefully, when we stand face-to-face with our Savior, our inevitable reunion can be sweet beyond measure as we see the quality of our earthly performance reflected in His smiling face.

I have been asked to share some of my life's experiences with you. In doing so, I do not wish to glory or boast in my own strength or talent. But, like Ammon, I do glory in my Savior and His goodness (see Alma 26:35–36). It is with deep gratitude and humility that I recount these very personal events. I pray that through my testimony the following principles may assist you in experiencing ways in which the Lord can make a miracle *in* your life and *of* your life as you move toward this future reunion.

Principle One: Make the Lord Your Partner as You Prepare

As we read the scriptures and observe President Hinckley's examples of "ordinary people who are engaged in an extraordinary undertaking," an unmistakable pattern and

Lawrence P. Vincent is a BYU professor of music. This devotional address was given on 4 November 2003.

path to the extraordinary becomes evident (Gordon B. Hinckley, “The State of the Church,” *Ensign*, November 2003, 7). All of the following men drew themselves away—most of them in fasting and mighty prayer—to receive direction and the strength to do what must be done. Moses on Mount Sinai, Nephi, Enos, Joseph Smith, and President Kimball—to name but a few—all formed a solid partnership with their Creator. All were feeling inadequate. All had monumental assignments or decisions to make. Even the most extraordinary being on this earth, Christ Himself, found it necessary to draw Himself away for 40 days before commencing His life’s work. At the end of this time a partnership had been forged that would sustain Him through Satan’s temptations and, finally, through His unimaginable suffering.

How much greater is our need? I venture to say that every man and woman sitting behind me on this stand, as well as many of you in this assembly today, have already formed this partnership and through it have experienced extraordinary miracles.

In my wildest dreams or loftiest aspirations I never envisioned myself as a professional opera singer. Never! My wife and I had been married but a short time when we first moved to Overton, Nevada, directly after graduating from BYU. I was content with my new job as a music teacher and, as far as we were concerned, this was to be our home for the rest of our lives. We bought an old home—and I mean *old*—and worked to fix it up with air conditioning, a picket fence, and other amenities. During the summer months I continued my education, completing my master’s degree at Northern Arizona University in 1977. It was there that the stirrings of a dream began to be felt.

My voice teacher and mentor, Edgar Stone, encouraged me to seriously think about a career in opera. I struggled with the idea and dismissed it. I couldn’t envision how such a career would facilitate the achievement of my primary goal—that of being a good husband and father. How

could I possibly balance family responsibilities, a stage life, and Church service? Would I be able to maintain personal integrity in such a highly competitive career? As I prayerfully considered this germinating dream, I began hearing of other members of the Church who had pursued such a course while successfully raising a family, but the most powerful source of encouragement and inspiration was my dear wife, Jeannie.

One evening after a rehearsal for a high school production, I returned home to find her sitting alone in our den. It was obvious she had been crying. Shocked, I asked her if someone had died. She said no. She had been listening to the recording of my master’s recital.

“Was it that bad?” I asked.

She smiled and told me, “No. No, it was just fine.”

However, she knew with certainty that the Lord had other plans for us and we would need to leave Overton.

Such an important and life-altering decision cannot be made alone. By then we had three sons. I knew that uprooting our little family from the security of our nearly completed home and comfortable job would be nothing short of insanity without confirmation from the Lord.

We fasted and fervently prayed for guidance. One afternoon, just as we were about ready to end our fast, I stopped at the post office to collect the mail. The July 1977 issue of the *Ensign* had arrived. I opened to the First Presidency message and read President Kimball’s life-changing words specifically addressing the arts:

Who of us has not sat spellbound with Aïda, Il Trovatore, or other of the masterpieces of Verdi . . . ? Can there never be another Verdi or his superiors? . . .

Is there anyone who has not been stirred by the rich melodic voice of Enrico Caruso . . . , Italian-born operatic tenor? Surely there have been few voices which have inspired so many.

President Kimball continued:

We also remember the celebrated Jenny Lind, the Swedish singer. . . . Do you think there are no more voices like Jenny Lind's? Our day, our time, our people, our generation, should produce such, as we catch the total vision of our potential and dream dreams and see visions of the future.
[Spencer W. Kimball, "The Gospel Vision of the Arts," *Ensign*, July 1977, 3]

Can you imagine how we felt as the impact of this message penetrated our souls? It was as if the Lord had literally spoken to us. We had received an extraordinary answer and knew *what* had to be done. Together, with the Lord as our partner, it became our challenge to figure out *how* to do it.

In another series of small, yet irrefutable miracles, we were able to sell our beloved home and were led to the name of John McCollum, a professor at the University of Michigan who agreed to accept me as a private student. On our youngest son Zachary's first birthday we loaded all that we owned into a rental truck and drove the 2,000-plus miles to Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Three years later, after completing my doctorate, I continued my singing career in New York City with the Goldovsky Opera Company.

Principle Two: Doubt Not, Fear Not

It seems that with each great spiritual event, after each divinely confirmed step, an intense buffeting follows. To illustrate, let us consider the experiences of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price and of Christ at the end of His great fast. After experiencing glorious things we cannot possibly comprehend, both were targeted for intense opposition. Using doubt and fear, Satan will also try to dissuade us from our course and persuade us to take the counterfeit.

The reality of professional singing, which included being absent from my family for up to eight weeks at a time during touring productions, was like a splash of cold water. The old,

nagging questions surfaced. What had I done? Had I left my job and dragged my little family far away from the security of a comfortable life for this? Had I really acted upon inspiration or should I let my dreams die and simply bury them? Things were definitely not turning out the way we had envisioned, and for the first time I was really afraid.

When I took these doubts and fears and laid them at the Lord's feet, the answer to our dilemma came as dramatically and miraculously as our directive to leave Overton. During one of our long-distance telephone conversations I told my wife about several of my colleagues in the touring group that had spent some time in Europe. There it was possible to be a member of an opera company, keep regular hours, have health and retirement benefits, and, best of all, stay in one place. It sounded like a dream come true. We had only one problem: how would we finance an audition tour to Europe?

Absolutely no one knew of our conversation. A short time after our talk and heartfelt prayer, a dear friend called. To my utter amazement he brought up the subject of a European audition tour and offered to finance the trip. With tears of joy and unbelievable gratitude we thanked our Heavenly Father for such an incredible miracle and the generosity of such a spiritually sensitive friend. I made my reservations shortly thereafter, boarded the plane in New York, and three weeks later miraculously had a job in a beautiful city, the oldest city in Germany: Trier.

Principle Three: There Is a Way Prepared

In Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, he wrote:

But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. [1 Corinthians 2:9]

My dear brothers and sisters, after you have invited the Lord to be your partner and dispelled

the doubt that can stop your progress, stand aside and allow Him to prepare the way.

When I returned home from the audition tour we had less than a year to financially prepare for our German adventure. We had moved in with my parents in Denver to save every penny possible. There were five plane tickets to purchase and, after our arrival in Europe, a car to buy and an entire house to furnish. How in the world could we earn that kind of money in such a short period of time?

Our middle son, Ethan, was in the second grade when he learned of our impending move. He and his older brother, Todd, had seen old paintings of snowy German towns with mosaic cobblestone streets upon which horse-drawn carriages were pulled. One afternoon as they asked a few questions about our upcoming move, it became touchingly apparent to us that they thought we would be moving to a place with no electricity and that our only means of transportation would be horse and carriage. Ethan excitedly came home from school one day. He had mentioned to his teacher that his Dad was an opera singer and that we would soon be moving to Germany. That evening his teacher called and asked me if I would visit his class and introduce the children to opera.

I thought, “No problem. I’ll just sing a couple of arias and answer a few questions.”

Several days later, however, the principal called and asked if I would present the program to the entire student body.

“Well,” I thought, “I guess Jeannie and I will really have to prepare something now.” That “something” evolved into an elementary school assembly program that we called “What Is Opera Anyway?” Its popularity increased as it was promoted by newspaper and word of mouth until nearly every school district in the greater Denver area requested our services. We tallied our earnings just before leaving for Europe, and—gratefully, miraculously—we had more than enough to finance our move and necessary purchases.

Principle Four: Work Hard and Wait upon the Lord

Are there times when you feel as if you have done everything in your power and the Lord still is not answering your petitions? As the days, months, and even years pass and your life seems to be on hold, let me give you some food for thought. Please turn with me to Malachi 3:10. All of you are familiar with the wonderful promise to those who keep the law of tithing:

Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.

Now let us focus our attention on the next verse. It holds a glorious promise of protection, of preservation, and of great hope:

And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the Lord of hosts. [Malachi 3:11]

Keep this verse in mind as I relate the following story.

Our first home in Europe was located in a beautiful valley nestled among ancient vineyards near Trier. One year there was an exceptionally good crop. The grapes were more plentiful and sweeter than they had been in years. Nearly everyone in the valley was dependent in one way or another on the success of the grape harvest. A few weeks before the laborious work of harvesting the grapes was to begin, a devastating frost hit the entire valley. When we awakened early the next morning, we were surprised to see hundreds of our neighbors already working frantically, trying to save as much of the crop as possible. The tiny stem holding each bundle of grapes

had been affected by the frost and was unable to hold its precious fruit any longer. Once the grapes hit the ground and the temperature rose, it was just a matter of hours before the grapes were ruined: The vine had “cast her fruit before the time” (Malachi 3:11; see also 3 Nephi 24:11).

Our family had made the German adjustment well. In addition to assimilating another language and culture, we had been lovingly accepted into our little branch. However, we knew that our time in Trier would be relatively short.

Theaters in Germany are classified according to their size, the number of orchestra members, and available finances. Trier is a small “city theatre” and is listed among European theaters as a “D” house. The dream of every opera singer is to be employed as a soloist in an “A” house. “A” houses, or theaters, are comparable to the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York City and La Scala in Milan. They include such opera theaters as Hamburg, Munich, Berlin, and the Vienna State Opera.

It was also my goal to sing in such theaters. I had worked hard and had done everything in my power to climb the rungs to a “C” house on my way to the larger opera stages. I shudder to think how many auditions I sang and how many times I heard the words “Thank you. You will hear from us if we need you.” Many of my colleagues were landing jobs in “C” and “B” houses. With each audition and each rejection, my confidence and hope waned.

Three years passed. One afternoon I received a call from an agent in Vienna. He had seen me in the tenor role of Cassio in the opera *Othello* and had recommended me to Eberhardt Waechter. Herr Waechter was looking for a tenor soloist to complete the ensemble for his upcoming position as director of the Vienna Volksoper.

Before I boarded the train for Frankfurt, where the audition was to be held, Jeannie and I once again prayed for guidance. We had worked and prepared in every way possible

and were trying to be patient. We shared our dream yet again with the Lord and put the outcome in His hands. Just a few hours later I called Jeannie with the miraculous news that I had, indeed, signed a contract. It wasn’t until later that I learned that the Volksoper was an “A” house.

With deep reverence and gratitude, my thoughts turned to the words “Neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 3:11; see also 3 Nephi 24:11).

Had I been offered a contract after any of the previous auditions, I would have immediately signed away the next several years of my life. I believe success had been withheld until my voice, my acting ability, and my command of the language had ripened. Even after signing, I had two additional years of preparation before the contract went into effect.

Principle Five: Allow the Lord to Step Between You and the Devourer

To introduce this principle, I would like to quote the last verse of one of my favorite hymns:

*Be still, my soul: The hour is hast’ning on
When we shall be forever with the Lord,
When disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
Sorrow forgot, love’s purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul: When change and tears are past,
All safe and blessed we shall meet at last.
[“Be Still, My Soul,” Hymns, 1985, no. 124]*

I wish I could say that my Viennese premiere had been brilliant, that I had stepped onto the stage and evoked bravos and a standing ovation from the audience. But, as it turned out, even with two years of preparation my nerves got the better of me. My first public performance as a member of the Vienna Volksoper ensemble did not go as well as I had hoped. To make matters even worse, I had to read about my inadequacies in several Viennese newspapers the next day. Every day for two years I had

worked on that killer aria. What had gone wrong? The performances that followed went very well indeed, but my dream of “making a big splash” in the international opera scene did not happen. We were devastated, and it took some time before the sting of this experience subsided.

Over the next few years, however, as I watched some of my colleagues experience the instant stardom for which I had hoped, I began to understand. To my sorrow I often saw their marriages dissolve and families suffer in the wake of long absences born of international singing contracts.

Who knows what would have happened to me, my marriage, my family, and my eternal welfare if things had happened that quickly? Would I have been spiritually mature enough at that time to say “no” to prestige and wealth if it would have compromised my goals as a father? The Lord knows infinitely better than we do what will help and what will harm us. If we allow Him, He will open doors or shut them hard for our spiritual protection and eternal progress.

Eventually the international contracts and membership in the Vienna State Opera ensemble did materialize. But in addition to these worldly blessings came great spiritual blessings: being present as my sons grew to maturity, serving the Lord in my calling as bishop, and interviewing each of my sons for their foreign missions—from Austria to the United States.

I look back with incredible gratitude to a loving Father who, for my own welfare, tempered my ambition and allowed me to wait for success.

Principle Six: Be Willing to Sacrifice All

The last principle is, perhaps, the most challenging. The Lord will require sacrifice. He will test our integrity and expect us to make difficult choices. He may ask us to “drop, our net” and walk away from certain situations to follow Him. He will ask us to bless others by freely imparting those material,

intellectual, or spiritual gifts that may be ours. This is a refining principle. It is that which moves the metamorphic process from ordinary to extraordinary in the direction of our Savior.

As a performer, the standards I set for myself long before I began my career were often challenged. There were times when I had to openly object to offensive stage movements or costuming. We must be willing to face ridicule or even dismissal, if need be, in meeting such challenges. Some will be black and white in nature. Others will be very private tests of integrity. All will prepare us to stand in the presence of the Lord without fear or shame.

As you study and dream, make decisions and plans, remember to make the Lord your partner. Do not allow Satan to plant doubts that can foster a change of heart and foil God’s divine plan for you. Allow the Lord to prepare the way as you work hard and wait upon His blessings. Know that there will be disappointments but that all will work for your welfare as you learn sacrifice and charity.

May I take this opportunity to say how grateful I am to be a part of the Brigham Young University community? Nothing that I have ever done professionally has been as satisfying. To be able to share those things that I have learned and help to further President Kimball’s vision of the arts as a teacher and mentor is a source of constant joy in my life. I was deeply touched and inspired by the cast and crew of our recent production of the musical drama *Abinadi*. How wonderful it was to hear from the stage words of a prophet testifying of the divinity of Christ.

In closing I would like to sing a medley of LDS hymns arranged by my accompanist, Timothy Doot. I met Tim at the University of Michigan as he was completing a degree in piano performance. He later received his master’s degree in performance as well as an MBA from the University of Texas. His wife,

Cathy, is with him this morning. She was one of the attending nurses for our only daughter, Sarah-Maria. Sarah spent much of her life in the hospital during the 14 months she was with us on earth. We had the honor of sharing the gospel with Cathy and later introducing her to her husband. One evening Tim and I were discussing the privilege we will all have someday of seeing the face of Christ. We decided to select four hymns that frame this sacred theme. Tim then composed the beautiful arrangement that I will sing for you.

My dear brothers and sisters, the day will come indeed, as Paul wrote, when

we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad. [2 Corinthians 5:10]

When the irrevocable passage of time has swallowed the minutes, hours, days, and years we call our earthly experience and we “lay this mortal by” (“O My Father”); when we look into the eyes of our Savior and fall to our knees at His feet, it is my prayer that we may feel His approval and hear His words “Well done, thou good and faithful servant, my child.” This is my greatest desire, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

