

## *Real Causes and Real Effects*

KEITH VORKINK

I am grateful and humbled to be with you today. As I was preparing for my talk, I was reminded of a story I once heard in a stake conference session a number of years ago. The story begins with a rancher performing chores out on his ranch one morning when he sees a shiny pickup truck drive onto his ranch and park.

Out of the truck steps a man in uniform who walks up to the rancher and states, "I'm here to inspect your ranch for any illegally grown drugs."

The rancher responds, "Fine, but do not go in that field over there," and points to a beautiful field to the east.

The officer replies, "Mister, I don't think you understand me. I am here to inspect your ranch, and I have the authority of the federal government behind me." Reaching into his pocket he pulls out some form of a badge and proudly displays the badge to the rancher. "See this badge, old man? This badge means I am allowed to go on any land," he says, pointing all across the farmer's ranch. "Have I made myself clear?"

The rancher apologizes, nods, and goes about his chores.

A short while later the old rancher hears someone screaming, looks up, and sees the officer running while being chased by a large bull in the field that the rancher had told the officer not to enter. With every step the officer takes, the bull takes two. With the distance shrinking between the

charging bull and the frantic officer, the rancher steps up onto the fence enclosing the field and yells, "Your badge—show him your badge!"

On college campuses everywhere, including this one, we do a fair amount of badge showing—and for good reason. Our faculty have gone to top graduate schools and have trained with many of the best scholars, which, among other benefits, has helped prepare them to stand at the front of their classrooms and speak with expertise and authority. Unfortunately I have no badge to pull from my pocket demonstrating my credentials to speak today. I am grateful for the vote of confidence from President Worthen and Vice President Richardson in extending this invitation. I am also grateful to each of you for coming to today's devotional. It is not lost on me that you have the choice to attend or not. To this end, I hope and pray for the presence of the Spirit and that we may be edified as a result.

I am grateful for my wife, Marcie, and for my children, all of whom are here except for our oldest daughter, Sarah, who is serving a mission in South Carolina and happens to return from her mission next week; we are excited at our house. I am grateful for my mother, other family

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*Keith Vorkink, associate dean in the Marriott School of Management, delivered this devotional address on March 28, 2017.*

members, and dear friends and colleagues who are here today as well.

### **Rafting Gone Awry**

I had the good fortune of growing up in the state of Alaska. It was a fantastic place to be raised. As an example of this, each year our Boy Scout troop would plan and carry out amazing high-adventure camps. We would go backpacking, canoeing, and even white-water rafting. For one such summer camp we decided to raft a well-known section of the Gulkana River. We had a great time. Despite a lot of rain—which is a reality of summers in Alaska—we rafted through beautiful country, caught seemingly endless numbers of fish, and saw abundant wildlife, including bald eagles and grizzly bears.

On one of the final days of the trip, we came up against the signature white-water challenge of the river: a section of rapids ending with a seven-to ten-foot waterfall. At this point many rafters would take their rafts and gear out of the river in a portage around the falls to ensure against harm or losing gear. We decided to carry our gear around the waterfall but to enjoy the thrill of running the rafts through the rapids and over the falls.

I went in a raft with my father, who happened to be one of our youth leaders. He situated himself at the center of the raft, where he could use the two large oars to steer. I sat near the front of the raft and was given a paddle, but my primary role was to stay out of the way. I still remember smoothly navigating the rapids, feeling confident and exhilarated as we approached the waterfall. Everything was lined up perfectly, and—much like you would experience on a roller coaster—we shot off the falls down to the water below.

Just after passing over the falls, the raft paused a bit and started moving backwards. I didn't understand why this was happening, so I turned back toward my father only to see him being engulfed by the falls, which immediately knocked him out of the raft and into the river.

Let me take a quick detour from this story to explain a bit more about the flow and current of this waterfall. As water flowed over the falls, the

force carried the water down to the river bottom, where the current rebounded, causing it to flow back toward the surface following a circular path. When the water came back up to the surface, it formed a wave that forced the water back upstream toward the falls. This wave, sometimes called a standing wave, was what our raft had hit and what had driven us back into the falls.

Now back to the story. There I was, alone in the raft—which had turned sideways from the force of hitting the falls—and in a brief moment I went from excitement to panic. But the ordeal was not over. Over the course of the next few minutes, which seemed to go on forever, the raft would slowly float downstream away from the falls until it hit the standing wave, which would reverse the raft's course back toward the falls. As the raft would approach the falls, the cascading water would hit the nearest side tube of the raft and force it to tip toward the falls as though it were about to flip over with me in it. However, each time the raft would approach the point of flipping, it would stop, fall back flat, and then float out toward the standing wave—repeating the process all over again. This back and forth between the falls and the standing wave was repeated about ten times.

During all of this back and forth my youth leaders and fellow youth were standing on the bank of the river shouting support and instructions to me in the raft. Though they stood only about fifteen feet from me and were shouting as loud as they could, it seemed impossible at the time for me to hear exactly what they were saying. The noise of the waterfall, the number of different people who were shouting at me at the same time, and, probably most of all, the overwhelming intensity of the situation drowned out their words. I could not hear what they were saying. At one point I came to the brilliant conclusion that they were trying to tell me to hold tight to the raft. So, trusting and having faith in their instructions, I did my best to tighten what was already a death grip on the raft.

Finally, after yet another near flip into the falls, the raft—now almost full of water—fell down and

floated over the standing wave instead of getting pushed back again. It then moved into a section of calmer waters, where I was immediately rescued by my leaders, who pulled the raft to the side of the river. As a side note, my father was also successfully rescued from the river about a third of a mile downstream.

Later that day we all gathered together and talked about what had happened. One of the Young Men leaders, who happened to have stood closest to me on the bank and who had shouted more than the others, told our Scout group how proud he was that I had shown courage and had followed the instructions they were shouting to me to “lean against the tipping raft.” He said that this was what had saved the boat from flipping and what had saved me from being seriously injured—or worse.

As he talked to the group about my obedience and bravery, I began to convince myself that his story was exactly what had happened. I had been brave; I had leaned against the tipping raft to keep it from flipping over. However, as time wore on and as I thought more about what had happened on the river, I realized that his description was not entirely accurate. What had saved me from the waterfall was the raft filling up with water and becoming heavy enough to keep it from tipping and to carry it through the standing wave. It had little to do with my following the instructions of the leaders. In fact, I hadn’t followed their instructions because I hadn’t heard what they were saying. The circumstances of that event made it difficult to figure out what had really caused my safe escape from the waterfall.

### **Incomplete Conclusions**

I believe my experience on the raft that day and the difficulty of determining what caused my safe escape represent, in some ways, the challenges we face in determining the true causes of outcomes in our lives. We make many mistakes in determining causality. Each party involved in my rescue had come to an incorrect or incomplete conclusion about what had led to my successful escape. I would like to address each party.

First, my Young Men leaders. I am sure that they were fearful for my safety and that their intentions were to do everything they could to save me. But they could not make it out to the raft, so they could not experience what was happening to me on the raft. They wanted to believe that their instructions were making a difference, but they were unable to tell that the sound of the rushing water was so loud that I could not hear their instructions. Perhaps they saw the tightening of my grip following their shouting and viewed this as my leaning against the tipping raft, concluding that their instructions had been received and obeyed and had caused my safe escape.

Second, the other young men. I believe they, like the leaders, were fearful for my safety and somewhat overwhelmed by the situation. They witnessed the leaders shouting instructions and likely saw what appeared to be my obeying those instructions. But there was enough uncertainty about what I had actually done that it allowed them to accept a story of my obedience and bravery. Perhaps they may have even said to themselves, “There is no way I could have done that. But Keith is brave, so of course he would have followed the instructions and saved himself.”

Last, myself. I wanted to believe that it was my bravery that had contributed to my escape, and while I know that my actions had something to do with the escape—since I had held on with the best grip a fifteen-year-old could muster—I did not do all that the leader claimed I had done. Yet I liked my leader’s story better, and perhaps due to my own insecurities at the time, I was glad that his story brought me attention and respect from both the leaders and my peers.

As this experience illustrates, we face many situations as helper, observer, or participant in which we can be misled or can make a mistake when assessing the true causes of the outcomes in our lives. Fear, insecurity, the distractions of the world around us, and an overwhelming number of voices can combine to confuse us and keep us from drawing the right conclusions about real causes and real effects.

I would like to spend the remainder of this talk discussing some of the challenges of drawing the right spiritual inferences and discussing a tool the Lord has provided to help us avoid making these mistakes. Like the use of inference in a statistical setting, the point here is not only to know the correct conclusion to draw but to realize that in some cases you should not draw any conclusions.

You might ask why I would make this the topic of my devotional. You wouldn't be alone in asking this question; the same question was posed by my own children when I told them of my plan. My response to them and to you is that one of the great challenges of mortality is to learn to make correct judgments in the face of uncertainty. This ability to discern is an essential part of the plan. Satan does not make this easy.

In a recent broadcast, President Russell M. Nelson said:

*Pray to discern between God's laws and the philosophies of men, including those cunning counterfeits of the adversary. Through eons of time, Lucifer has honed his craft. He is skilled at distraction, distortion, deception, and misdirection. I plead with you to avoid his cunning snares as you would avoid a plague!* ["Prophets, Leadership, and Divine Law," worldwide devotional for young adults, 8 January 2017]

Another perspective of this challenge comes from the following quote:

*Man is so intelligent that he feels impelled to invent theories to account for what happens in the world. Unfortunately, he is not quite intelligent enough, in most cases, to find correct explanations. So that when he acts on his theories, he behaves very often like a lunatic.* [Aldous Huxley, *Texts and Pretexts: An Anthology with Commentaries* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1933), 278]

Now, *lunatic* is a strong word, but on our own we too frequently fail to see the real cause-and-effect relationships. I suspect that if each of us were to take a quick inventory of our recent past, we would find an occasion in which we drew the

wrong conclusion or the wrong spiritual inference about what caused an outcome in our lives or in the life of a loved one. As President Nelson stated, the consequences of such errors can be as severe as a plague.

### **Satan's Deception**

Similar to the way the youth leaders and perhaps my peers were led to think that I was the cause of my safe escape, Satan can deceive us into focusing our attention on the outcome more than on the causes. For example, I could claim that since my raft did not flip over and I was able to escape, my actions must have caused this to happen.

The scriptures teach us that in the premortal existence each of us was given a choice about whose plan to follow: God's plan or Satan's plan. Satan's plan confounded cause and effect. His plan would save all mankind—the desired outcome—but would do so without the development that was central to God's plan, which development would be the real cause of our eternal life. Yet Satan's plan appealed to a third of the hosts of heaven, convincing them that this was the right way to achieve eternal life. As we know, they were incorrect in their evaluation of the plans and would face eternal consequences as a result.

Let me present a case that may be even closer to us. Do we think of serving a mission in a way similar to the way one-third of the hosts of heaven thought of Satan's plan for eternal life, by focusing more on the outcome? Or do we focus our efforts on the behaviors that will *cause* a successful mission? To focus primarily on the outcome—serving a mission—we may miss important preparation or shortchange our need for growth. We may even be inclined to ignore sins or imperfections in our lives if we believe they might keep us from the desired outcome of serving a mission. To view serving a mission in this way will keep us from coming to know Christ and His Atonement and from qualifying for the companionship of the Holy Ghost—the most important companion of a successful missionary.

Another of Satan's tools is his ability to convince us that certain correlations are actually

causations. Now, I know we have all regularly heard that correlation doesn't confirm causation, yet we still fall prey to its lure. I share a somewhat silly example: a plot of two variables that appear to be quite correlated—the number of movies with actor Nicolas Cage that come out yearly and the corresponding number of annual deaths by drowning in a pool. [The speaker displayed a line chart with two nearly identical lines.] By simple visual analysis, one might conclude that an overconsumption of Nick Cage movies might actually drive movie watchers to drown themselves in their backyard pools. My children have offered some theories as to why this relationship might be causal, but we know that this correlation should not lead us to any cause-effect conclusions.

This is an overly simple example of why we should reject causality, but we know that Satan uses much subtler methods to deceive us into believing causal relationships that will draw us from the straight and narrow path onto alternative paths that end in unhappiness. How often do we observe others struggling with faith crises and conclude that the causes of their struggles are based on behaviors or information that we observe and that appear to be correlated? Or perhaps, in contrast, do we observe friends who seem to be living a life without trials and conclude that they must be spiritually superior because their paths seem clearer when compared to the many obstacles we see in our own lives? The Lord exhorted us to “judge not” (Matthew 7:1), but the allure of observable correlations can be challenging to ignore. The best response in many cases is to not draw causal conclusions based solely on correlated information.

Related to his correlation tool, Satan works to confound and confuse us through unobserved or omitted information. If we go back to the example of the raft, the outside observers—the Young Men leaders and my peer Scouts—did not know that the noise of the crashing water kept me from hearing their instructions, nor did they appear to see that with each trip into the falls the raft was filling

up with water. Had they observed these facts, they would likely have altered their conclusions about what had caused my safe escape.

In many cases we will never be given all of the information to determine causality, and what we do not observe may be a key driver of the outcome. Just as before, our best conclusion may be to draw *no* inference, realizing that we just don't have all of the information. However, Satan lures us into the need to try to explain all behavior, and his offered conclusions lead us away from seeing others as God does.

Satan will also work to convince us to use unobserved or omitted information to our advantage. I liked the conclusions of my Young Men leaders when they saw me as brave and obedient. It actually took me a few hours to come clean to them that I had not in fact leaned against the tipping raft.

One of the great attractions of social media is that we can control what information is conveyed to the world and what information is not. We must remember, as stated in 1 Samuel 16:7, that “the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.” There is no information unobserved by or omitted from the Lord, and His love for us is not dependent on how perfect we appear on Instagram. But Satan will work to convince us that we can be justified “to cover our sins” (D&C 121:37)—to hide the true causes of our outcomes—if doing so will work to our worldly advantage.

Satan will accomplish this by playing on our insecurities and fears. Elder Neal A. Maxwell stated, “He who was thrust down in the first estate delights to have us put ourselves down. Self-contempt is of Satan” (“Notwithstanding My Weakness,” *Ensign*, November 1976). Even after I was rescued, for a period of time I was still shaken and scared. I did not feel like I was on solid ground. When the story was told of my bravery, I almost immediately—but temporarily—began to feel better about myself. I liked the positive attention, until I admitted to myself that it was not based on the truth.

### The Holy Ghost: A Spiritual Instrument

In their search to determine causal relationships, economists and statisticians have defined the term *instrument* as information that can help to rule out unimportant correlations, to control for unobserved or omitted variables, and to determine the direction of cause-and-effect relationships. I would like to borrow this term and discuss a powerful spiritual instrument the Lord has provided to help us identify causal relationships and make correct spiritual inferences. This spiritual instrument is the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Elder James E. Faust taught:

*Satan has had great success with this gullible generation. . . . There is, however, an ample shield against the power of Lucifer and his hosts. This protection lies in the spirit of discernment through the gift of the Holy Ghost. This gift comes undeviatingly by personal revelation to those who strive to obey the commandments of the Lord and to follow the counsel of the living prophets. [“The Great Imitator,” *Ensign*, November 1987]*

The phrase “spiritual discernment” that President Faust used parallels very closely with the phrase “spiritual inference” that I have been using throughout my talk. As President Faust stated, the Holy Ghost helps us to see the real causes of real effects. He also told us how we can qualify for this gift: through striving to obey the commandments and by following the counsel of our living prophets. Notice that President Faust did not say that we have to be perfectly obedient to the commandments, only that we must strive. Also, in contrast to perhaps the world’s view, we will better see and understand causes and effects when we exercise faith in our leaders and obey their counsel.

Recently our Church leaders have reminded us of the roles that the Sabbath day and sacrament observance can play in maintaining our relationship with the Spirit. Proper participation in the sacrament will more fully bring the Spirit into our lives. Elder David A. Bednar made clear the

connection between the sacrament and our relationship with the Holy Ghost:

*Through the ordinance of the sacrament we renew our baptismal covenant and can receive and retain a remission of our sins (see Mosiah 4:12, 26). In addition, we are reminded on a weekly basis of the promise **that we may always have His Spirit to be with us**. As we then strive to keep ourselves clean and unspotted from the world, we become worthy vessels in whom the Spirit of the Lord can always dwell. [“That We May Always Have His Spirit to Be with Us,” *Ensign*, May 2006; emphasis in original]*

I am personally grateful for Aaronic priesthood holders who petition God each week on my behalf for help that I might always remember Christ and always have His Spirit to be with me. Renewing those covenants on Sunday has brought the Spirit more deeply and consistently into my life.

Let me share an example from my family’s life of how the Holy Ghost can help us to see the truly causal relationships. A number of years ago our family was on a trip to visit relatives. While sitting in a small plane waiting to take off to another airport, where we would catch a connecting flight, a lightning storm arose and caused a significant delay in our departure. All planes were grounded for a while. Marcie’s and my immediate response to this delay was to get on the phone and call airlines, hotels, and car rental agencies to discuss contingencies if we did not make the connection.

During the chaos of these calls, our youngest daughter suggested that we pray for help. The thought hadn’t crossed my mind, but it was quickly supported by her brother and sisters.

With Marcie’s endorsement, we did our best to gather among the two rows of seats we were sitting in, and, trying not to draw attention, we offered a brief, sincere prayer for the Lord to provide a solution to our predicament. The prayer brought relief and peace, and soon thereafter the plane took off.

Not long before we arrived at the connecting airport and well after the time our connection was

scheduled to leave, the pilot came over the intercom and stated that contrary to typical practice, the connecting flight was waiting at the gate for those on our flight. We were able to make the connection.

My sharing this story is not to indicate that God cares about the Vorkink family vacation plans; that might be a likely interpretation, but that would be the wrong inference to draw. What we learned from that experience and what the Spirit communicated to me in that simple prayer was that God was most interested in letting a young girl and her family know that He listens to us and answers our prayers.

In conclusion, the bulk of my talk has been a cautionary tale against claiming causality when we do not have the ability to truly identify it. I want to end, though, with a witness of a causal relationship that we all know and that I personally know. Jesus Christ is the great cause. He has a perfect knowledge of things as they really are, including of each of us. Through His Spirit He can change our minds and our hearts. He will help us to see with spiritual eyes the causal relationships that will lead to happiness and eternal life and to ignore those that will draw us away from Him and His love. This I testify in His name, Jesus Christ, amen.