

Repentance: A Mighty Change of Heart

BRENT W. WEBB

Several years ago I had lunch with a young man who was a student in my department here on campus—one whom I had taught in a graduate-level class. With his permission I would like to share with you his remarkable story.

John was born healthy but developed bone cancer in his leg when he was only 11 years old. He underwent some of the early chemotherapy and radiation treatments. The cancer in his leg was successfully treated, but the medication used in the chemotherapy attacked his heart and resulted in a disease called cardiomyopathy. Such chemotherapy procedures today avoid the onset of this disease with frequent heart biopsies during the treatment. Unfortunately, these were not performed routinely when John was treated.

In this condition the muscles in his heart slowly deteriorated. Despite his weakened heart, John lived an active life, even becoming an Eagle Scout. By age 19 his heart had weakened seriously; nonetheless, against the recommendation of his doctors, John submitted his application to serve a full-time mission. His cardiologist advised against a mission, but, on seeing John's determination to serve, suggested that he request a mission close to home. The doctor candidly warned him and his parents

that his last years of life might be spent there. John accepted a call to the California Oakland Mission. At the time, being among those who were called to serve for 18 months, he prayerfully extended his mission service to 24 months when given the opportunity.

After his honorable mission teaching Cambodian refugees, John returned to BYU to study mechanical engineering. When he was 25 the muscle decay in his heart became so severe that his doctor indicated a heart transplant was the only option. After careful screening, John was placed on the eligible organ transplant recipient list at the University of Utah, and he waited for word of organ availability with an electronic pager at his side 24 hours a day. His family moved temporarily from California to Bountiful to be near the hospital. After nearly two months John was notified that a donor heart had become available, and he went immediately to the hospital for the transplant. In a surgical procedure that lasted only 87 minutes, John's diseased heart was taken from

Brent W. Webb was a BYU professor of mechanical engineering and executive -director of the Office of Research and Creative Activities when this devotional address was given on 18 May 1999.

his body and replaced by the healthy heart of a young automobile accident victim whose family's unselfishness made critical transplants of several body organs possible all across the country. Incidentally, the heart transplant donor was female, and John used to joke that his transplant might be the only way he could "capture the heart of a woman." After two weeks of hospital recuperation and nearly six months of required recuperation near the hospital, he returned to BYU to complete his studies.

I was then and still am amazed at the miracle of John's story. Sitting beside him in the cafeteria, I was astonished to realize that I was talking to a young man whose heart had been taken from his body, and the heart of another was beating in its place. After his transplant John resumed a full, active life with participation in Men's Chorus, an election as president of the student section of the national professional society to which he belonged, and Church service. He completed a master's degree and was married in the temple in August 1992.

I'm quite sure John appreciates mortality more than perhaps most do. And he recognizes that his routine will never be the same. For the rest of his life he will face frequent visits to the doctor, careful oversight of his physical activity, and a daily regimen of medication to prevent his body from rejecting his borrowed heart. His heart transplant, however, has made it possible for him to escape what the doctors promised would be certain early death.

John's heart transplant was critical to his continued life here on earth. I use his story to illustrate a principle of the gospel vital to our spiritual lives, relying on a powerful scriptural image from the Book of Mormon. Alma the Younger had traveled around Zarahemla persecuting the Saints despite fervent prayers offered in his behalf by his father. His persecution must have been rather aggressive, because we are told that the people of Zarahemla were praying in earnest for him as well. As you

recall, Alma and his wicked friends were visited by an angel who called them to repentance. Later, after his conversion, Alma the Younger preached to the very people he had persecuted. Speaking from personal experience, he asked his people, "Have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? *Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?*" (Alma 5:14; emphasis added). In the same sermon he reminded his people of the goodness of God toward their fathers, saying, "Behold, *he changed their hearts; yea, he awakened them out of a deep sleep, and they awoke unto God*" (Alma 5:7; emphasis added).

The parallels between the young man in my department and Alma's conversion and teachings are evident. John underwent a *physical* change of heart and was spared from premature death. Alma preached of our need for a *symbolic* change of heart, with the certain safety from *spiritual* death. The Book of Mormon refers to the heart 162 times—nearly every third page. Most of these references are in the context of the heart's need for the healing and strengthening power of repentance.

The spiritual cardiomyopathy I have described exists in various degrees among us. Although all of us suffer from day to day, some are affected in such a way that it seriously limits their spiritual quality of life. And as was the case with John's diseased heart, if treatment is not sought, the effects are fatal. Sadly, those suffering from physical heart disease are not always treated effectively, but the Lord has provided a treatment against spiritual heart disease—a treatment that is always effective, if followed.

Please don't confuse the emphasis placed on being cleansed and healed through the process of repentance with a tolerance for the transgressions that prompted the need. It is always better to make the choice *not* to sin. Prospective missionaries were warned in conference priesthood session several years ago

that adopting the attitude of “sowing one’s wild oats” with the intention of repenting prior to leaving for the mission field was not sincere repentance. To use the heart transplant analogy, adopting such an attitude would be similar to repeatedly exposing ourselves to physical harm, all the while counting on the availability of an organ replacement when finally our careless living caused life-threatening damage. The Lord has warned against procrastinating the day of our repentance. Although true repentance heals us completely of the disease caused by sin, we cannot replace the time spent without the Spirit of the Lord, its accompanying joy, and the good we might have accomplished during that time.

We recognize, then, that to avoid sin is always the correct route. However, we are human and sometimes succumb to temptation. We must then submit ourselves to the repentance treatment to which I have alluded. One of the classic seminary scripture mastery verses underlines this:

For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.

[Mosiah 3:19; emphasis added]

Just as John prepared during the months preceding his life-changing transplant surgery, this scripture illustrates the preparation for spiritual surgery that brings about a change of heart. Repentance is therapeutic and restores one’s heart to its youthful purity and childlike vigor.

The story of Alma the Younger’s change of heart illustrates well both the *process* and the *product* of repentance. Recall that the sons of

Mosiah were involved in the persecution of the members of the Church with Alma the Younger, and they, too, were visited by the angel.

(Incidentally, their names were Ammon, Aaron, Omner, and Himni. So deep was their change of heart that when the people needed a new king, they chose Aaron—previously one of their fierce persecutors. Further, after the decision was made to elect judges rather than to be ruled by a king, the people elected Alma the Younger—again, formerly one of their persecutors.)

After the sons of Mosiah’s conversion, they sought and were granted permission to go on missions to the Lamanites, where they labored for 14 years. (I wonder: How many of them had girlfriends who waited?)

It was during this mission that Ammon requested of the Lamanite king Lamoni that he serve in his stables. After valiantly protecting the king’s flocks, Ammon had the opportunity to teach the king the gospel and to witness his miraculous conversion, as well as the conversion of his entire court. The king decreed that Ammon and his missionary brethren be allowed to preach in all the land. In Alma 23 we are told that, as a result of the missionary efforts of Ammon and his brethren, thousands of the Lamanites were brought to the truth, had their hearts healed by the Lord’s redemptive power, and gave up their indolent lifestyles. Wanting to distinguish themselves from the Lamanites, the converted king and his subjects took upon themselves the name Anti-Nephi-Lehies.

In contrast to Ammon’s missionary success, the other sons of Mosiah met with resistance in neighboring cities with the Amalekites and Amulonites, who, the scriptures say, hardened their hearts and refused to believe they had need to repent. Clearly they had need for spiritual surgery but chose not to add their names to the heart-transplant waiting list. Instead, these wicked Lamanites marshaled the help of the remaining unconverted Lamanites in the

land to wage war against the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. In Alma 24 the king related their conversion story and described the steps of their repentance. King Lamoni spoke of being convinced of their sins, signifying recognition of their wrongdoing; of having the guilt taken from their hearts, indicating the feeling of godly sorrow and remorse; and of covenanting never to take up their swords again, suggesting a resolve to never sin again (see Alma 24:7–17). (My son Brandon is serving a mission in France. In his departing talk given in sacrament meeting, he described the will to completely turn from sin. Quoting a great man—well, Yoda—he said, “Try not. Do or do not. There is no try.”)

What were the fruits of the converted Lamanites’ repentance? Those who had undergone this change of heart made a covenant with the Lord that they would never shed blood again, and they buried their weapons of war (as opposed to hiding them under the bed or on a shelf in the closet, “just in case”). So great was their commitment to forsake their sins that they prostrated themselves before the wicked Lamanites as they came upon them with weapons in hand. One thousand and five of them were slain without offering resistance. Now perhaps we would have the faith to sacrifice our *own* lives in testimony of the conversion we have experienced, but can you imagine the pain of watching your parents, brothers, and sisters being slain at your side? I think of the ultimate faith in the Savior that would require of me if this were to happen to my wife and children.

The image of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies kneeling and prepared to die brings to mind a recent, powerful example of similar spiritual resolve: the young woman in Littleton, Colorado, who was killed because she would not deny her belief in God. Such bold expressions of faith require a vision into eternity that I’m afraid I don’t yet possess.

King Benjamin described this radical change of heart in his classic discourse to the people of Zarahemla. Before his death he assembled his people near the temple for his final counsel. His subjects were people like you and me—“ancient-day Saints” who had been baptized, who were making a living, who were raising their families, etc. So powerful was the effect of his preaching that all of the people signed their names as a covenant to keep the commandments.

Mosiah 5:2 indicates that the Spirit of the Lord had wrought a mighty change in them—or in their hearts. They had “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually.” If I were to ask what a synonym might be for the word *disposition* in these verses, you would probably respond with the word *desire*. But that response would only be partially correct. Synonyms for *disposition* include *temperament*, *character*, and *personality*. Our desires come and go, often in relation to our environment, but character and personality are more permanent, more fundamental to the makeup of our soul. The change of heart we seek that accompanies true repentance actually brings a change of appetite for sin. Our likes and dislikes relative to good and evil are shaped by the Atonement. We learn not only to avoid the sin but the temptation to sin as well. There is no earthly entity that has this power to change our temperament. Wars are fought trying to bend people’s wills and loyalties, but only the Savior can transform within us something so fundamental as our character and our appetites.

There are other traits shared by those who have experienced a change of heart. Let me illustrate several that I have observed.

Those who have undergone a change of heart exhibit also a change of life and of lifestyle. My friend John’s life and lifestyle has been permanently changed because of his heart transplant. Some activities must be part of his daily routine, and others are to be forever avoided. The same is true of spiritual

heart-transplant recipients. The Book of Mormon illustrates this beautifully with a “before” and “after” picture of the Lamanites. Enos described the Lamanites *before* their spiritual transplant in this way:

And I bear record that the people of Nephi did seek diligently to restore the Lamanites unto the true faith in God. But our labors were vain; their hatred was fixed, and they were led by their evil nature that they became wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness; feeding upon beasts of prey; dwelling in tents, and wandering about in the wilderness with a short skin girdle about their loins and their heads shaven; and their skill was in the bow, and in the cimeter, and the ax. And many of them did eat nothing save it was raw meat; and they were continually seeking to destroy us. [Enos 1:20]

Can you imagine being called to a mission full of a people with such characteristics? *After* their conversion, the Lamanites (or Anti-Nephi-Lehies) were quite different, as described in Alma 24. The Anti-Nephi-Lehies were

distinguished for their zeal towards God, and also towards men; for they were perfectly honest and upright in all things; and they were firm in the faith of Christ, even unto the end.

And they did look upon shedding the blood of their brethren with the greatest abhorrence. [Alma 27:27–28]

They took their swords, and all the weapons which were used for the shedding of man’s blood, and they did bury them up deep in the earth.

And this they did, it being in their view a testimony to God, and also to men, that they never would use weapons again for the shedding of man’s blood . . . ; and rather than spend their days in idleness they would labor abundantly with their hands. [Alma 24:17–18]

The change of life and lifestyle that accompanies conversion is seen in our preparation for temple worship. There are 15 questions by which we certify our eligibility to attend the temple. The first four questions relate to our testimony of the Godhead, Jesus Christ as our Redeemer, the restoration of the gospel through the Prophet Joseph Smith, and the existence of a living prophet who holds priesthood keys and pronounces the Lord’s will today. If our witness of these four key truths is strong enough, we will modify our lives such that we can respond affirmatively to the remaining questions, which test our commitment to chaste living, the law of tithing, the Word of Wisdom, honesty, the keeping of covenants, and the principle of continued repentance. Again, a change of heart brings a change of both life *and* lifestyle.

To remain healthy, those who submit to a spiritual heart transplant need the surgeon’s watchful care forever after. John will undergo regular, frequent visits to the doctor to check the condition of his transplanted heart. He recognizes this as a necessary part of the “package,” one to which he willingly submits to enjoy the simple blessing of life itself. Similarly, we who seek a spiritual change of heart must rely forever after on the Savior, who alone performs the sacred surgery in our change of heart. Only he can keep the changed heart beating strongly, can prevent further disease from creeping in, and can provide the guidance for the proper diet and exercise for the soul. We must rely on Christ’s continued care to enjoy a healthy spiritual lifestyle.

Our outward being changes as we undergo this change inside. While serving in a campus bishopric several years ago, I became acquainted with a young woman who had become mired in serious sin. When she first reported to us, her appearance was disheveled and grubby, and she was wearing tattered jeans and a flannel shirt. Her posture was poor, her shoulders were curved, and her head was bent

in shame. Her face, which rarely wore a smile, was veiled by uncombed hair. But the impression she radiated even more vividly was that she *felt* “vile,” which was obviously manifest in her person and demeanor. As described in Isaiah and repeated in 2 Nephi, in the lives of the unrighteous, “the show of their countenance doth witness against them” (2 Nephi 13:9).

This young woman was suffering from a severe form of the kind of heart disease I have discussed today. After nearly a year of her working closely with the bishop, I was struck by her transformation. Her repentance had borne fruit, and her heart had been purged of the painful sin she had carried at our first meeting. Wearing a beautiful, modest dress and with her shoulders and head erect and her hair drawn back from her smiling face, she spoke with humble confidence. Her purity showed in her eyes as she took on a brilliance she didn’t have before her “transplant surgery and recovery.” The changes in a person’s life who has undergone sincere repentance are often so dramatic that they are noticeable on the outside.

Perhaps this is what Alma was referring to, in part, when he asked if we had been spiritually reborn and if we had received the image of God in our countenances (see Alma 5:14). Two years ago a neighbor of mine, Val Hale, who is the associate athletic director at BYU, was in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with the basketball team for the WAC championship tournament. Other WAC teams were playing there, and while the New Mexico team was competing, Brother Hale noticed their cheerleaders. Two of them were, as he described, “different” from the others. After the game, these two New Mexico cheerleaders lingered near the BYU team players. Besides the obvious reasons for doing so, Brother Hale discovered that the cheerleaders were members of the Church.

Several nights later, in El Paso, Texas, the New Mexico team was playing again, and their cheerleaders were there as well. Brother Hale,

seated next to another LDS man, said to him, “Two of those New Mexico cheerleaders are LDS. Can you tell which two they are?” The man looked briefly at the cheer squad and said confidently, “That one, and that one,” pointing correctly to the two LDS young women. A healthy heart gives light to our countenances.

Those undergoing spiritual cleansing are softened in their interactions with others. They make better home and visiting teachers. They are less apt to be critical of those around them, looking for the good instead of the faults. They see and seize opportunities to serve more readily. They are more patient and less quick to anger. (I have noticed that when I am truly seeking spiritual health, I am able to be more restrained in what can be for me most un-Christian behavior—such as when I’m behind the wheel of my car in heavy traffic.) In short, the change of heart brings the Savior’s hand into every facet of our lives “at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death” (Mosiah 18:9).

I hasten to clarify that, unlike John’s heart transplant surgery that required only 87 minutes, a spiritual change of heart is a lifelong process. When I was young I wondered why I couldn’t be converted so quickly and have my unrighteous desires swept from me in the blink of an eye. Although Alma the Younger’s experience with the angel brought a dramatic change in him in the space of just two days and nights, his conversion was a process requiring patience and perseverance. Somewhere between nine and 17 years after the angel appeared to him, Alma was preaching the gospel to the people of Zarahemla. As he bore his testimony he indicated that he knew the doctrine he preached to be true. And how did he know? Not even mentioning the appearance of the angel, Alma explained:

Behold, I testify unto you that I do know that these things whereof I have spoken are true. And how do ye suppose that I know of their surety?

Behold, I say unto you they are made known unto me by the Holy Spirit of God. Behold, I have fasted and prayed many days that I might know these things of myself. And now [as opposed to the time immediately following the angel's appearance] I do know of myself that they are true; for the Lord God hath made them manifest unto me by his Holy Spirit [not necessarily by the voice of the angel]; and this is the spirit of revelation which is in me. [Alma 5:45–46]

We must not become discouraged if we do not receive the witness and the associated change of heart overnight. A friend and colleague recently shared with me an experience illustrating this. His father was born in the Church and was influential in his mother's conversion to the gospel. He was faithful as his children were born and grew up, and he participated in Church service, home teaching, and his sons' Aaronic Priesthood ordinations. He fully supported his sons' goals to go on missions. Nevertheless, while his oldest son—my colleague—was serving a mission, this good man somehow drifted into inactivity. Because some aspects of his life were out of harmony with the commandments, he felt unworthy and unwelcome at Church. His alienation from the Church continued after my friend returned from his mission, and, sadly, he was not present when my friend and his wife were sealed in the temple. Several years into their marriage, my colleague was facing decisions regarding professional direction and financial concerns and was struggling somewhat spiritually himself. He summoned the courage to ask his inactive father for a priesthood blessing. After a long pause his father responded, "I'd like to give you a blessing, but I need to get right first."

Life went on for both father and son, and the priesthood blessing was not mentioned again. The son's request for a blessing was perhaps the first in a series of events over a considerable period of time that eventually brought his father back into full activity.

Among others, experiences that touched this man's heart included the wake-up call of a life-threatening health problem and a risky corrective surgery, the attention of loving and responsive priesthood leaders, and frequent visits from home teachers who challenged him. Slowly, surely, this man returned to the principles of the gospel and to Church. Some 10 years after that request for a priesthood blessing, with the request long since forgotten by my colleague, his father humbly approached him and said, "I'm ready to give you that blessing now, if you're still interested." The ensuing blessing was worth the work and the wait. Barely two years later my friend's father passed away. The transforming power offered in the Atonement is time-tested and is often time-intensive.

Is this difficult process of repentance worth the anguish and pain, as Alma described it? If one were to ask my friend John if his heart transplant was worth the trouble, how do you think he would respond? He is delighted to be alive and enjoying a full measure of happiness. When I spoke to him recently, he was not preoccupied by the careful avoidance of dangerous activities, the daily round of medication, or the invisible tether between him and his doctor. Instead, his greatest worry right now is the challenge he and his wife are facing potty-training their three-year-old.

Alma, in describing his repentance to his son Helaman, declared, "Yea, I say unto you, my son, that there could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains." A description then followed of the emotion of his forgiveness: "Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy" (Alma 36:21). The difficult road of repentance not only cleanses us and prepares us to live with God in the hereafter but also offers us hearts swollen with joy beyond description in this life.

Starting or “jump-starting” the process toward a change of heart can be motivated by a variety of experiences. Alma’s transformation began with something as magnificent as the visit of an angel. While I was serving as a bishop on campus, a young man sought help after years of enslaving sin because, in his words to me, “you knew my name.” Friends, parents, even casual acquaintances sometimes ignite our desire to seek a change of heart. We never know how we might influence others in this lifelong and life-changing process. However the Lord chooses to help us get started, our change of heart is granted as we demonstrate our hunger for it in a sustained way. Samuel the Lamanite described how the transformation continues. In speaking to the wicked Nephites, he stated succinctly:

As many . . . as are brought to the knowledge of the truth . . . and are led to believe . . . the prophecies of the holy prophets . . . , which leadeth them to faith on the Lord, and unto repentance, which faith and repentance bringeth a change of heart unto them—

Therefore, as many as have come to this . . . are firm and steadfast in the faith. [Helaman 15:7; emphasis added]

May we study the words of the prophets. Truly studying and living their teachings culti-

vates faith in Jesus Christ. Faith always leads to repentance, and a change of heart follows. The depth of the Savior’s atoning power in our hearts is governed by the degree to which we study and follow the words of his prophets, ancient and modern. The formula as outlined is simple and is guaranteed.

In conclusion, I cite the case of a young man who had undergone a long and difficult repentance process. I asked him to describe how the Atonement had affected him. He thoughtfully characterized his change of heart this way: “This is not religion anymore; it’s life.” That same realization has filled me as I have sincerely repented of wrongdoing and sought a change of heart. Christ promises to those who repent that “though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18). We will experience the exquisite joy spoken of by Alma as we receive the Lord’s forgiveness.

I witness that God lives and answers our prayers; that his Son, Jesus Christ, is the Savior and Redeemer of the world; that his Church with authority and truth has been restored to the earth; and that President Gordon B. Hinckley stands as the prophet today. I testify that a change of heart brings real changes to heart and life—for I have witnessed it in others and experienced in myself that miracle—in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.