

Successfully Failing: Pursuing Our Quest for Perfection

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This is my first opportunity to address you in a devotional as president of the university. Let me begin by telling you, “You look really good.” That is different from being good-looking, though you are that as well. I hope that each of you has some inkling of the spirit you carry with you and the light that radiates from you. It is evident to visitors to the campus—who sometimes struggle to come up with words to describe what they see and feel in your presence. I thank each of you for your individual contribution to what is the real Spirit of the Y that those who come on campus experience so profoundly. It truly is an honor to be your president.

Those who have heard me speak these past few months will not be surprised that I begin by quoting a portion of the BYU mission statement, which was approved and adopted by the board of trustees more than thirty years ago. That mission statement describes well both the process and the anticipated results of a BYU education. I urge each of you to read and ponder it, as well as the BYU Aims, as this new year begins.

The most familiar line of that mission statement summarizes, in general terms, the details that follow. “The mission of Brigham Young University,” it states, “is to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life.”¹

My remarks today focus on one reality about that quest for perfection. It is a truth that is hard to deny, yet difficult to accept. It is this: We will all fail. More than once. Every day.

I know that may sound startling and not the most optimistic of messages, so let me be quick to add that this does not mean that you or I are failures or that the quest for perfection is futile. There is a difference between failing, even repeatedly, and being a failure, as I hope to explain.

Failing is an essential part of the mortal phase of our quest for perfection. We don’t often think of it that way, but that is only because we tend to focus too much on the word *perfection* and not enough on the word *quest* when we read the mission statement. Failure is an inevitable part of the quest. In our quest for perfection, how we respond when we fail will ultimately determine how well we will succeed.

My plea for you today is to learn how to fail successfully. To help you in that regard, let me provide a little broader context for the quest for perfection and the role that failure plays in that process.

Kevin J Worthen was president of Brigham Young University when this devotional address was delivered on 6 January 2015.

The primary purpose of our mortal existence is to help us become like our heavenly parents. One of the things we need to do in order to accomplish that purpose is to learn and apply truth in our lives. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that “it is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance”² and that “a man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge.”³ Thus learning is an essential part of not only our BYU experience but also this mortal phase of our quest for perfection.

The scriptures teach that there are three main ways we can learn: one, by study;⁴ two, by faith;⁵ and, three, by experience.⁶ A lot has been written and spoken at BYU about how we learn by study and by faith,⁷ but we talk much less about how we learn from experience. Yet learning from experience is one of the essential purposes of our mortal existence.

In the book of Abraham the plan we all accepted in the grand premortal council is described as follows:

We will go down . . . , and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell;

*And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them.*⁸

This earth, the setting for our mortal existence, was created so that we could “prove” ourselves. But I believe we may not appreciate the full meaning of the word *prove* in that scripture. In everyday usage the word *prove* means to demonstrate something that *already* exists.⁹ Thus we take final exams to prove what we already know about the material we have been studying that semester. But the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides an additional meaning for the word *prove*. It indicates that *prove* also means “to find out, learn, or know by experience.”¹⁰

I believe the opportunity we have to *prove* ourselves in this life was not designed to allow

us to demonstrate to God how obedient we already were before we came to earth. He, and we, already knew that. God formed this earth and gave us this mortal existence so that we could “prove” ourselves in the other sense of that word—so that we could “find out, learn, or know by experience” truths that we did not already know and that we could not learn in any other way.

I believe there are certain things, some of them essential to our exaltation, that we can learn only through experience. We could not have remained in our premortal condition, memorized all the attributes of godhood, and then, after passing a written exam, become like our heavenly parents. We came to earth to “prove” ourselves, to learn from our own experiences how to know good from evil and other important lessons we could learn only by our own experience. And one of the best ways we can fully learn those essential lessons is by failing in our efforts.

Let me illustrate with a simple experience from my own professional life. Two years after I graduated from law school I found myself working on a tax law project for a partner in a law firm in Phoenix, Arizona. By that time I had not only finished law school but had completed judicial clerkships for two very good judges at two of the best courts in the country and had passed the bar exam. In my mind I knew how to be a lawyer. Even though I had not had any tax law experience before I received the assignment, I knew quite well where to begin looking for the answer to the question posed to me by the partner. After extensive research of the applicable statutes, regulations, and cases—and after revising several drafts—I confidently presented to the partner a memo that I felt answered his question.

The partner quickly skimmed the memo, read the conclusion, and then confidently opined, “This can’t be the law.”

I was quite taken aback and a little offended. “I’ve read the statutes, the regulations, and the cases,” I responded. “That’s what they say.”

“I don’t care,” he retorted. “Tax law in this area can’t work the way you’ve described it. Go try again.”

It was, to use the term my children often use to describe my less glorious moments, an “epic failure.”

After further discussing the issue with the partner, I examined the problem from several angles that started at different points from the one at which I had first begun. Over time a different analysis appeared—one that changed the answer to the question in a subtle but important way. When I presented a revised memo to the partner with a more in-depth analysis and a different answer, he was satisfied. I asked him at that point whether he had known the answer to the question all along and was just trying to make work for me.

“No,” he replied, “I really didn’t. I just know how these kinds of businesses work, and I have a pretty good feel for tax law. Your earlier approach just didn’t seem right.”

I knew how to acquire abstract legal information; I even knew how to analyze that information in theoretical terms. The partner, however, knew how to be a lawyer—and there is a difference between those two things, just as there is a difference between knowing the attributes of God in an abstract sense and making those attributes a part of our character, which is what our quest for perfection requires.

How do we learn that latter important skill? The partner helped me understand that as well.

When I asked him what it was that allowed him to almost intuit the right answer to the problem, he replied, “It takes good judgment.”

“And how do you acquire good judgment?” I asked.

“Good judgment,” he said, “comes from experience.”

Then, after pausing for just a few seconds and with only a hint of a smile, he added, “And experience comes from bad judgment.” In other words, from failing.

As one motivational speaker observed:

*We always think of failure as the antithesis of success, but it isn’t. Success often lies just the other side of failure.*¹¹

The lesson is so prevalent in life that three years ago the *Harvard Business Review* devoted an entire issue of that publication to the topic of how to learn from failures.¹²

We can see the same lesson in the familiar experience of Nephi when he was given the assignment to obtain the brass plates from Laban. As we know, his first two efforts failed, but he persisted and ultimately succeeded. In the process he discovered the power of being “led by the Spirit,”¹³ a critical lesson that he may not have learned if the first effort to persuade Laban to release the plates had been successful. Nephi’s life was forever changed in a positive way because he failed twice—and, more important, because of the way he responded to those failures.

Thus failing is a critical component of our eternal progress—our quest for perfection. And because of the Atonement we can—if we respond to failures in the right way—be blessed with a new kind of learning that allows our failures to become part of the perfecting process. As Elder Bruce C. Hafen has explained, the beauty of the gospel is that “because of the Atonement, we can learn from our mistakes without being condemned by them.”¹⁴ What a wonderful blessing that absolutely marvelous and indispensable portion of the plan of salvation provides to each of us, if we will but take advantage of it.

This does not mean that we should try to fail as often as we can. “Not all failures are created equal.”¹⁵ In one of the articles in the *Harvard Business Review* Failure Issue, Professor

Amy C. Edmondson noted that in business there are three main kinds of failures, some of which are better than others.

First, there are failures that result from the lack of precision in routine but important matters—for example, a failure to follow design specifications in the manufacturing process. According to Professor Edmondson, these are “bad” failures that are preventable and should be eliminated as quickly as possible.

Second, there are failures that are the inevitable results of complexity in processes—mistakes made in uncontrollable situations, such as in triage in a hospital emergency room. These failures are unavoidable and cannot be controlled, but they can be managed.

Finally, there are failures that occur when researchers try to push the frontiers of knowledge with regard to a product or service—failures made by a research lab in developing a new product, for example. These failures can be “good” failures if structured in the right way because they can accelerate the learning process.¹⁶

If we are to fail successfully—if failure is to move us along in our quest for perfection—we need to make similar distinctions in our daily efforts and daily failures.

In our own personal lives, willful failure in important, routine things we can control constitutes sin, which we should avoid as much as possible. In things that are routine but essential to our eternal progress—things like daily prayer, daily scripture study, and regular church attendance—we should strive to eliminate all failings. In these matters we can come very close to perfection very quickly, and it is important that we do so, because success in these endeavors provides the secure foundation that allows us to deal effectively with the other two kinds of failure.

When determining what things fall into this first category of failure, we might profitably ask ourselves two questions: One, are

these things entirely within our control? And, two, are they things that in the long run really matter? There is a correlation between affirmative answers to those two questions. As Elder Hafen once observed:

One way to distinguish what matters a great deal from what does not matter so much is to ask whether the subject is within our control. If it is, then it probably matters enough to merit our attention. But if the subject of our fretting is inherently beyond our control, it is not likely that God will hold us responsible for our ultimate success or failure as to that concern.¹⁷

At the other end of Professor Edmondson’s failure spectrum—“good failures” resulting from efforts to extend the frontiers of our knowledge—we should not be so fearful of failing that we avoid trying new or hard things merely because their very newness or difficulty increases the risk of failure. Don’t let concern for protecting your grade point average dictate the courses you take. Challenge yourself, academically and in other ways. You may discover skills, talents, and joys you would otherwise miss out on. Your mortal experience will be a more productive part of your quest for perfection if you intentionally stretch yourself with new challenges, especially those that involve a real risk of failure. As someone once observed, “If you aren’t in over your head, how do you know how tall you are?”¹⁸

Maybe our most difficult challenge is to deal with the second category of failures—those that are not willful sin or intentional calculated risks but rather the unavoidable, uncontrollable failures that occur because of the messiness of life, because of factors beyond our direct control. What do you do when, for the first time in your life, you get an A– or a B or a D, even though you have worked very hard? Or when you try your best but you still don’t make the Women’s Chorus? Or when the relationship you are pursuing

falls apart? Or even when all these things and more important ones seem to go wrong at the same time and you feel completely alone, overwhelmed, and totally a failure? What do you do then?

Let me suggest you follow the advice given in Hebrews 10:35: “Cast not away . . . your confidence.” You have not arrived at this point in your lives without having accomplished much, as Peggy has just explained. I know you may sometimes feel like the least intelligent, least talented, and most socially awkward student who has ever set foot on this campus, but you were not admitted to this university on a whim. The process is better than that. And you are better than that. More important, you have the potential to be much better than that. Remembering what you have already accomplished and understanding your full potential can contribute to the development of the kind of emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual resilience that will allow you, in the words of the BYU mission statement, to meet “personal challenge and change.”¹⁹

Professor Martin E. P. Seligman, one of the founders of positive psychology, has observed that the most common characteristic of those who are able to overcome almost any kind of uncontrollable failure is that they are optimistic.²⁰ And the good news is that people can be taught to some degree “to think like optimists.”²¹ One way Professor Seligman suggests is by helping people view setbacks as things that are “[1] temporary, [2] local, and [3] changeable.”²² In other words, they react to failures by thinking, “[1] It’s going away quickly, [2] it’s just this one situation, and [3] I can do something about it.”²³ That process, studies have shown, is aided by recalling past successes²⁴ and recognizing individual strengths that we have.²⁵

Eternal gospel truths, available to us through modern revelation, make this kind of optimistic thinking even easier. For example, we know that each of us “is a beloved spirit son

or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny.”²⁶ Thus we have much greater strengths and talents than we realize.

Moreover, we are promised that, from an eternal perspective, our “adversity and . . . afflictions shall be but a small moment.”²⁷ Thus we can be certain that whatever we are going through will be temporary.

Finally, we can be assured that however we have failed, it can, from an eternal perspective, be changed. The Atonement is that powerful and that comprehensive. As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland put it:

*If you are lonely, please know you can find comfort. If you are discouraged, please know you can find hope. . . . If you feel you are broken, please know you can be mended.*²⁸

Because of the Atonement, all failures are changeable and temporary, except the one that occurs when we give up. So whatever you do, don’t you dare give up.

What I am suggesting is not simply an affirmation of the power of positive thinking; it is a recognition of the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ—the perspective it gives us, the truths it provides, and “the infinite virtue of [Christ’s] atoning sacrifice”²⁹ that is available to us all. Yes, I am asking you to trust yourself more, but, more important, I am asking you to trust God. I urge you—in your moments of doubt and despair, in the times when you think you have failed and you think you can’t make it right—to focus more on Him and less on yourselves.

Too often we ask the wrong question when we fail. We ask, “Am I good enough?” But the real question is, “Is God good enough?” Is He as good as He says He is? Can He really deliver on His promise that “all things” will “work together for [our] good”³⁰ if we will trust Him and strive to do the best we can and keep going whenever we fall short?

I testify that He is. God is as good, as powerful, as loving, as patient, and as consistent as He says He is. If we will but focus on the eternal truths He has made available to us, both through institutional revelation and through personal promptings and reassurances, He will turn all our failures into successes. I bear my witness that He lives and loves us with a love we cannot comprehend. He gave His Son so that we might move forward in our quest for perfection with full confidence and assurance that we will succeed despite our failures.

I bear my solemn witness of these truths and express my love and God's love for each of you, in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. *The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* (Provo: BYU, 2014), 1; approved by the BYU Board of Trustees on November 4, 1981.

2. D&C 131:6.

3. HC 4:588.

4. See, e.g., D&C 88:118; D&C 90:15; D&C 109:7; D&C 9:8.

5. D&C 88:118; D&C 109:7.

6. See, e.g., Genesis 30:27 (“I have learned by experience that the Lord hath blessed me for thy sake”); D&C 121:39 (“we have learned by sad experience”); D&C 105:10 (“that my people may be taught more perfectly, and have experience, and know more perfectly”).

7. See, e.g., Richard G. Scott, “Acquiring Spiritual Knowledge,” BYU Campus Education Week devotional address, 17 August 1993; K. Newell Dayley, “And Also by Faith,” BYU devotional address, 1 February 1994; John W. Welch, “Study, Faith, and the Book of Mormon,” BYU devotional address, 10 May 1988; Richard N. Williams, “Faith, Reason, Knowledge, and Truth,” BYU devotional address, 1 February 2000; Lynn E. Garner, “Learning in an Eternal Context,” BYU devotional address, 5 June 2001.

8. Abraham 3:24–25.

9. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “prove” (“to demonstrate, establish”; definition 1), oed.com/view/Entry/153398?rskey=NE6KvZ&result=2#eid.

10. *OED Online*, s.v. “prove” (definition 7).

11. Leo F. Buscaglia, *Born for Love: Reflections on Loving* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992), 7; quoted in Leon F. Seltzer, “Mastering Failure and Rejection (Part 3 of 3),” *Evolution of the Self: On the Paradoxes of Personality* (blog), *Psychology Today* (30 June 2010), psychology-today.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201006/mastering-failure-and-rejection-part-3-3.

12. See the Failure Issue, *Harvard Business Review* 89, no. 4 (April 2011), hbr.org/archive-toc/BR1104.

13. 1 Nephi 4:6.

14. Bruce C. Hafen, “A Disciple’s Journey,” BYU devotional address, 5 February 2008.

15. Amy C. Edmondson, “Strategies for Learning from Failure,” *Harvard Business Review* 89, no. 4 (April 2011): 50.

16. See Edmondson, “Strategies for Learning,” 50–51.

17. Bruce C. Hafen, “Two Cheers for Excellence,” in *Excellence* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 78–79; see also Hafen, *The Broken Heart: Applying the Atonement to Life’s Experiences* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 102.

18. Often attributed to T. S. Eliot; see also Willem Meiners, *Those Who Win Are Those Who Think They Can* (Baltimore: Publish America, 2000).

19. *Mission and Aims*, 1.

20. See Martin E. P. Seligman, “Building Resilience,” *Harvard Business Review* 89, no. 4 (April 2011): 100–106. (Noting an experiment in which people were subjected to uncontrollable shocks and noises, Seligman wrote: “About a third of the . . . people who experience inescapable shocks or noise never become helpless. What is it about them that makes this so? Over 15 years of study, my colleagues and I discovered that the answer is optimism” [p. 102].)

Seligman develops and explains his ideas more fully in his book *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (New York: Free Press, 2011).

21. Seligman, "Building Resilience," 102; see also Seligman, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).

22. Seligman, "Building Resilience," 102.

23. Seligman, "Building Resilience," 102.

24. See Seligman, *Flourish*, 30–34.

25. See Seligman, *Flourish*, 38–40.

26. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, November 1995.

27. D&C 121:7.

28. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Broken Things to Mend," *Ensign*, May 2006.

29. "The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," *Ensign*, April 2000.

30. Romans 8:28; D&C 90:24; D&C 100:15; D&C 105:40.