

Facing the Algebras of Life

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Welcome to fall semester 2017. I hope you have a wonderful experience this year at BYU. I remember my first semester here as a student. I was thrilled at the thought that I was finally going to further my education, but, at the same time, I have to admit I was somewhat anxious. The prospect of being a student at BYU was daunting. I was a nontraditional student returning to school when our youngest child was in kindergarten. I remember looking at the syllabus of each class and wondering if I could do everything that was required.

I had chosen English as a major and was looking forward to attending all of the classes. I hoped I could keep up. I say I was looking forward to attending all of the classes, and that is mostly true, but there was one exception: intermediate algebra.

Algebra and I have a dubious history. Algebra was a required course in junior high and in high school, and I learned quickly that algebra was not one of my strong points. I did manage, however, to pass those precollege algebra classes—mainly by doing extra-credit assignments given to me by sympathetic algebra teachers. So, knowing what I knew about my history with algebra and knowing that I would have to take the intermediate algebra class in order to graduate from BYU, I did the only thing I could think of: I procrastinated.

The problem with procrastination is that whatever you choose to procrastinate never seems to

go away. Instead it looms large. The time finally came when I could procrastinate no longer. It was the last semester of my senior year—the proverbial eleventh hour. I finally registered for the algebra class, attended the first day of class, and immediately knew I was in over my head.

My friend Mary, who is a mathematical whiz, could sense my panic. She suggested that I drop the class and register for the independent study algebra course. She said she would tutor me. I was so grateful to her.

That was the beginning of what my family calls “the year that Mom took algebra.” It consumed a lot of my time. Passing my algebra class became a family project. Not only did I have the help of my friend Mary, who tutored me, but I also had Kevin’s help and the help of my two sons. They spent hours helping me with my homework. They truly endured this experience with me.

When I wasn’t working on my homework, it seemed like I was expressing my discontent to anyone who would listen. In other words, I complained a lot. I remember complaining to my mother about the fact that I was an English major and that I didn’t understand why I even had to take algebra.

Peggy S. Worthen, wife of BYU president Kevin J Worthen, delivered this devotional address on September 12, 2017.

In a very reassuring, motherly way, she said, “Peggy, you never know when you are going to need algebra.”

I am sure she thought it was good counsel, but I was forty-three years old and had somehow managed to get by without algebra up to that point in my life. I suppose one never knows when the ability to solve a quadratic equation will come in handy. But to this day I am still waiting for that moment to arrive.

The day I had anxiously anticipated finally arrived. It was time to take the final exam. In order to pass the class, I needed to pass the final. I felt I was prepared. I sat down, took the test, and, guess what? I failed. I failed the test by one point—one miserable point! As you can imagine, I was not very happy.

The only thing I could think of doing besides crying at that time was to go directly to the counseling office at BYU. The counselor I met with was very patient while I explained my great frustration that I had failed by one point. I told the counselor that I didn’t want to take the test again and that I felt like I shouldn’t have to—especially since the grade I received wouldn’t even affect my GPA. I believed I had a valid argument. The counselor suggested wisely that I wait a week and retake the test. If I didn’t pass, then we could possibly discuss other alternatives.

The last thing I wanted to do at that point was to retake the test. I just wanted the counselor to tell me that I was right. I left the counseling office determined that I was not going to take the exam again.

Of course everyone who had suffered through this experience with me naturally wanted to know how I had done on the exam. I am sure that they didn’t want to go through this experience with me again either. They were very sympathetic when I told them that I had failed and that I wasn’t going to retake it. I felt that they would support me in my decision. That is what I thought, anyway.

However, when I told my friend Christy what had happened and about my resolve not to take the test again, instead of saying something like “I don’t blame you,” she said something that stopped me in my tracks.

Her response was, “You know that’s not what you’re going to do. You need to retake that test.”

That was the last thing I wanted to hear. But at that exasperating moment I knew she was right. So, much to my chagrin, I spent the next week studying. Apprehensively, I took the exam again, and, guess what? I passed! I not only passed but I passed with points to spare! And there was much rejoicing in the Worthen household!

Now when I think about my ordeal with algebra, I am grateful I had the experience—even though it was, at times, very unpleasant and difficult. It was definitely a time of growth for me. Although I didn’t think the algebra course was an important part of my English degree, it was an important part of my education. It was a personal victory for me. I was ready to quit after I had failed, and I felt justified in doing so. But after a friendly nudge, I decided to give it one more try. And although I did not master algebra, I was able to achieve success on the second try.

As I now look back on the experience, I know I would have regretted quitting, and I know that the regret I would have felt if I had quit would have been worse than any discomfort or frustration I may have experienced while trying to learn algebra.

President Gordon B. Hinckley, who knew the importance of both an education and of not quitting, gave this counsel:

I hope you will look upon the educational opportunity that you have as a great blessing. I know it is a grind. I know it is difficult. I know you get discouraged at times. I know you wonder why you are doing it at times. But keep on, keep hammering away, and keep learning. You will never regret it as long as you live but will count it as a great blessing.¹

President Hinckley also stated:

You have a mandate from the Lord to educate your minds and your hearts and your hands. The Lord has said, “Teach ye diligently . . . of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are

abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms—that ye may be prepared in all things” (D&C 88:78–80).²

You as students of BYU are here to learn and to obtain an education. You have all heeded the mandate that President Hinckley spoke of. You are all obeying the commandment given in the Doctrine and Covenants that tells us we must “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118).

There will be times when you may become discouraged while striving to obtain your education. When those times come, please remember that what you are doing is praiseworthy. You are seeking to improve yourselves as well as the kingdom of God. In an address given at the LDS Business College, Steven C. Harper provided this helpful insight about seeking learning:

Seeking is a long, patient, persistent process that includes internalizing the best books, including the scriptures, where we learn not only the most important facts but the most valid meanings and values to give to the facts. Seeking is hard work. It is not for the weak-willed or faint of heart, nor for the intellectually

or spiritually lazy. But it will sustain faith in a world intent on destroying it.

. . . Seekers are wanted. . . . We are all commanded to be seekers.³

My hope for you this year is that you will be diligent seekers and that you will not give up, even when facing algebra-like challenges. I promise that as you do so, your lives will be happier now and in the future. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, institute of religion devotional address, 15 April 1997, Ogden, Utah; in *Discourses of President Gordon B. Hinckley*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 453–54.

2. Gordon B. Hinckley, “First Presidency Message: A Prophet’s Counsel and Prayer for Youth,” *Ensign*, January 2001.

3. Steven C. Harper, “The Choice to Believe,” LDS Business College devotional address, 29 September 2015, ldsbc.edu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1212:the-choice-to-believe&catid=50&Itemid=129.