

“To Act and Be Acted Upon”

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[Author's note: The following essay, except the footnotes and afterword, was originally given as a sacrament meeting talk in September 1995. Although some of the material may seem a bit homey, it was included as a vehicle for sharing faith and building community with a broad segment of my perhaps not atypical congregation. I offer the talk in its original form as a sincere attempt at inclusive yet thoughtful LDS discourse.]

LET ME BEGIN WITH TWO STATEMENTS from a man who 350 years ago struggled to live a life of faith. An eminent mathematician, Blaise Pascal was also a philosopher and religious thinker who knew both the value of rigorous analysis and the limitations of reason. The first quotation, from his *Pensées*, is his famous theistic wager:

Let us then examine this point, and let us say: “Either God is or he is not.” But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide this question. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you wager? . . . Let us weigh up the gain and the loss involved in calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win you win everything, if you lose you lose nothing.

Pascal, the “inventor” of probability, weighs the possibility of infinite gain against finite loss and concludes that a reasonable person would choose faith: “You want to find faith and you do not know the road. You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have.”¹

The second quotation, referred to as Pascal’s “Memorial,” is from a very different, very private document—a piece of parchment which after Pascal’s death was found sewn into the hem of his jacket, apparently to be carried with him at all times. It consists of shorthand notes (for per-

1. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth, Eng: Penguin, 1966), 150-52.

sonal use) of an overwhelming, almost inexpressible experience. It reads, in part:

The year of grace 1654, Monday 23 November . . . from about half past ten in the evening until half past mid-night.

Fire.

"God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob," not of philosophers and scholars.

Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace.

God of Jesus Christ.

My God and your God. . . .

The world forgotten and everything except God.

He can only be found by ways taught in the Gospels. . . .

"O righteous Father, the world had not known thee, but I have known thee."

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy. . . .

Let me not be cut off from him for ever!

"And this is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent."

Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ.

Let me never be cut off from him!

Sweet and total renunciation.

Total submission to Jesus Christ and my director.

Everlasting joy in return for one day's effort on earth.

*I will not forget thy word. Amen.*²

Two very different callings to religious faith from one remarkable man. The first, the wager, is a public admonition recommending a life of faith purely as a matter of will, based on rational calculation. The second is a very moving, very private calling, all the more so because it was so clearly meant for Pascal alone. It is the memorial of a sacred and intimate two hours which—it would seem—profoundly changed Pascal's spiritual life.

Which account offers the better recommendation? Both, it seems, could result in a life of obedience, of Christian service, of self-discipline, and hope. And though the first does not preclude subsequent intervention by the Spirit, it certainly does not rely on it. It is motivated by human agency, by *our* reaching out to God; whereas the second is founded on grace, on God's extending himself earthward. What difference does this distinction make to Pascal and to us?

We are promised repeatedly in the scriptures that we are agents in spiritual matters—that we are to act and not be acted upon (2 Ne. 2:24–28); that if we seek, we shall find (Matt. 7:7); that if we ask with a sincere

2. Ibid., 309–10.

heart, the truth will be manifest unto us (Moro. 10:4,5); that if we experiment upon the word, our understanding will be enlightened (Alma 32:28-33, 41, 42). These are some of our most beloved passages of scripture and there is little wonder why; they confirm our deepest hopes, attesting that heaven is not far away and that we can receive it within us if only we do our part.

Our membership in the church attests to the truthfulness of these promises. I would venture that each of us—at one time or another—has received personal revelation that has confirmed our commitment to a life of faith. Take a moment and recall to your mind such an experience.

It may be one of great clarity and persuasion, an experience like Pascal's "Memorial" when you felt the immediacy of God's presence, when you knew beyond the shadow of a doubt and were converted. Or you may recall one of the more common, less dramatic manifestations of the Holy Spirit—the intuitions, feelings, swellings of heart, or tingles. These are fleeting experiences: they come to us when we read scriptures, sing hymns, share testimonies. They teach us that Christ's gospel is good, and that we can be a part of it. They provide fertile soil for the more memorable experiences, allowing us "to recognize and appropriate the extraordinary when it comes our way."³

As you reflect on spiritual moments from your own past, I would like to differentiate such experiences into two categories: the ones we initiate and the ones we do not. The first are the revelations we seek—answers to prayers, inspiration for specific problems, priesthood blessings. We use our agency to connect with God, expecting direction and a palpable sense of his presence in return.

The second group includes those workings of the Spirit which just come to us, which take us by surprise. These are often the less dramatic experiences described above. They testify of Christ, tell us of the needs of others, remind us of our covenants, incline us to community. They invite us—not at our bidding—to reach beyond ourselves in compassion or wisdom, to experience more of the gospel's joy.

Indeed, it seems that while sometimes we act for ourselves in spiritual matters, many other times we are acted upon, not according to our own wills, but as Nephi tells us in the familiar passage, "according to the will of the Holy Spirit" (2 Ne. 2:28). And as much as I cleave to my agency, I will admit here that there is something about my self-initiated spiritual encounters that repeatedly leaves me frustrated. All too often the responses to these are harder for me to decipher and easier to doubt or second guess than those I do not seek.

3. See Thomas V. Morris, "Suspensions of Something More," in *God and the Philosophers*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press, 1994), 18.

We do not very often talk in sacrament meeting about our spiritual doubts, about prayers that seem unanswered or revelations that do not work. But let me give two examples.

(It is a frightening thing, but as I review my own spiritual autobiography, I come up with several of these. For some reason our minds—my mind, at least—is programmed to harbor doubts and remember them with clarity, building up a store of grudges to hold against God in the future. These apparently failed, agency-initiated experiences leave us feeling very, very vulnerable.)

The first experience. Due to a rare genetic condition (a balanced translocation of chromosomes 2q and 13, for those in the know), my husband, Grant, and I spent much of the first four years of our marriage seeking direction in our family planning decisions. We prayed daily, fasted, counselled with both medical and priesthood authorities, and attended the temple to seek guidance. The questions seemed to us to have eternal significance, to be those that God should care about. And yet no matter how hard we pleaded, the heavens remained closed. In the end we made our own decision, a decision we could live with, but also one that felt simply like the right thing to do; the burden was lifted. And yet it distinctly did *not* feel like a response to the Spirit. We used our agency, made a decision, and moved on.

The second story. Long ago when I was a freshman at BYU I was dating a boy (this was not Grant) who became very interested in our future prospects together. At his suggestion we found a quiet place to inquire of the Lord in vocal prayer about the eternal possibilities of our relationship—I remember it so clearly! A music practice room in the basement of the Franklin S. Harris Fine Arts Center. We knelt down, offered a prayer, and I was immediately swept with a vibrant, burning response, exactly what from seminary I had come to recognize as confirmation from the Holy Ghost. It was a powerful spiritual moment. But even an hour later I knew that I would never marry him.

(Let me add at this point, lest there be any doubts, that I know as clearly as I know anything—from reason, from experience, from the Spirit—that marrying Grant in the temple was not only the best thing I have ever done, but the most fundamentally “right” thing as well.)

But what is happening here? We use our agency to initiate an encounter with the Lord. We put God and his scriptures to the test and get no response, or worse yet we get a response we know is wrong. What then are our options?

(1) We can question ourselves, our worthiness, our desire, our faith (can we ever say that we’ve asked with “*nothing* wavering?” [James 1:6]). We even question our ability to discern the promptings we might receive. Although this self-questioning may sometimes be the appropriate diagnosis, it can also bring soul-wrenching despair: Am I *unworthy*? Do I *lack*

sufficient faith?

(2) We can question God. In its mild guise, this takes the familiar form of murmuring; in its more severe form, we abandon our Providence-filled view of the world. In any case we experience a crisis of faith; and all too often we have comforters who are more than willing to take our side and give bad counsel.

(3) We can resolve to stay the course and keep the faith. Though the spiritual nourishing of our testimony may fail, still we can cling to our agency. We can choose to accept Pascal's wager as an unfortunate alternative. We can resolve, in an act of will (but also, strangely enough, of faith), to continue to trust despite evidence to the contrary.⁴

There are several methods by which we can implement this last option: we use our creativity to consider ways in which the questioned answer may indeed be right, we wait for the benefit of hindsight (Sister Camilla Kimball used to talk about this as "putting things up on a shelf"⁵), we wait for further light, or we simply admit that we do not know. We concentrate on what we *do* know, realizing how much is at stake.⁶

Let me share with you here my favorite scripture, one that I have never heard quoted over the pulpit (and perhaps with good reason since it addresses this very issue of dealing with uncertainty). It is found in the sixth chapter of John, right after Jesus has told his disciples that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood to obtain eternal life—admittedly a difficult doctrine, especially without foreknowledge of the Last Supper and Crucifixion:

4. The book of Job shows all three of these responses as Job stoutly defends his innocence against the insinuations of his would-be friends, questions the justice of God, and affirms that "though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15).

5. See Caroline Eyring Miner and Edward L. Kimball, *Camilla: A Biography of Camilla Eyring Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1980), 126.

6. Choosing to believe, despite unresolved questions, can be defended as a rational response as well as an act of faith. See William James's famous essay, "The Will to Believe," and Arthur C. Danto's account of W. V. O. Quine in *Connections to the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989):

In Quine's view, any proposition can be held constant if it is important enough to hold it constant. There is an element of choice, an inexpugnable component of decision, at every point. We do not willingly, in science or religion, surrender certain propositions—but neither *must* we surrender them under the onslaught of experience. For we can always explain experience away if it is important enough for us to do so. . . . The property in effect is this: The system works. It enables us to go on. It is true in the way in which a ship is seaworthy. If the ship does not carry us across the waters, we abandon it for another or make repairs. And so with our beliefs. The system, as Quine puts it, faces the tribunal of experience collectively, and meaning itself is conferred on experience by what significance it is supposed to have for the total system (117; emphasis in original).

From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him. Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God (John 6:66-69).

While this obstinate clinging to faith may sometimes seem the only acceptable option, it is always a two-edged sword, for though it keeps us in Christ's fold, we remain there as wounded followers, often with a disinclination to seek again. We use our agency to stay the course, but we too often use it, simultaneously, to cut ourselves off from further spiritual growth. The challenge is to remain vibrant and receptive, willing to be entreated (Alma 7:23) despite disappointment or confusion. The will can do its duty and endure to the end, but in the end, "the spirit [alone] giveth life" (2 Cor. 3:6).

There are some curious things about using our agency to seek revelation. First, we often take this approach in matters of vital importance, when the stakes are high precisely because we are desperate for direction. These include such questions as whom to marry, when and how many children to have, what career to follow, where to live, what church to join, or how to respond to health concerns.

Second, we often bring to these experiences an expectation of remarkable, unpredictable, and specifically *not* reasonable answers. These irrational promptings somehow prove that since we would not have thought up a particular response ourselves, the Spirit must be acting. (Though, actually, as we mature in wisdom, in the gospel, and in the ability to put aside self-interest, our expectation should be just the opposite—that as our lives become more akin to the Savior's, our own best judgment and the Spirit's promptings should coincide more and more.)

Third, as we do grow in experience with the Spirit, in "getting answers," there is an urge to be proud of our spiritual success, to think that our agency to ask somehow dictates God's agency to respond. We have an urge to domesticate God and make him useful—we come to expect him to use his efforts to warn us of danger, or even to keep us comfortable. Perhaps one of the difficulties inherent in our initiating encounters with God is that too much of our complicated selves, our mixed motives, and our limited understandings are present for the clear light of God's wisdom to filter through.

Though we are to "act for ourselves," what does it mean to do this "according to the will of the Holy Spirit," as Nephi put it? As a vehicle for communicating God's will, the Spirit is a skittish thing; it is elusive, we cannot force it. (Which is probably why for long stretches of Christianity the Spirit's office was limited to attending scripture.) For all the injunctions to seek and find, we are always the Spirit's guests. As recorded

in John 3:8, the Spirit, like the wind, "bloweth where it listeth." We are as often strengthened by the unanticipated as we are frustrated by the unanswered. Though we "experiment upon the word," it is not exactly the scientific method we employ.

And generally when the Spirit does speak, it offers us plausibility rather than proof. There are very few revelations that given enough time or challenge we are not able to question. Our memories are short; our flesh is weak.

Lest I leave you only with accounts of my spiritual doubts, let me share with you one of my most vivid, treasured experiences with the Spirit, which nevertheless demonstrates this point all too well. Sometime after the freshman relationship mentioned above, I was dating another young man—this time a returned missionary in a position to be talking seriously about marriage. He proposed, and as I was praying, privately this time, about whether I should accept, I heard a voice—a male voice—clear and audible, which said, "You can't marry Steve Peterson [not his real name] if you're in love with Grant Hardy." This moment, as you might have guessed, was the first time that I realized I *was* in love with Grant, who—it turns out—was receiving similar promptings on his mission in Taiwan. In due time we married, and I have always been grateful for that particular instance of the clear, unmistakable voice of the Spirit.

Yet many years later when watching *The Sound of Music*, I was taken aback to hear the captain offer a nearly identical profession to Maria about his prior intention to marry the baroness. His simple and reasonable explanation: "You can't marry someone when you're in love with someone else." I was shocked by the familiarity of the words.

While I supposed that the Spirit could quote Hollywood screenplays if it so chose, a more plausible explanation danced in my head. (We always know when the "creativity option" is at work and struggle against it for honesty's sake.) I doubted the source of the voice I had heard. Surely things had turned out well—perhaps the most valid test of inspiration—but still I could not help but wonder whether the Spirit really had spoken those words, those many years before, inserting those names as a mere courtesy to prevent confusion. It was too easy in hindsight to reduce the experience to the romantic longings and sublimated script of one too many viewings of a favorite musical in my impressionable youth.

God, it seems, *could* choose to reveal himself in such a way that a person would find it psychologically impossible to doubt the reality of the experience at the time or many years later—and sometimes, some special times, it seems that he does.⁷ Listen, for example, to the prophet Joseph Smith's testimony of his first vision:

7. See Jerry L. Walls, "On Keeping the Faith," in Morris, 102-12.

I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true . . . For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it; at least I knew that by so doing I would offend God, and come under condemnation (JS-H 1:25; see also v. 24).

Such certainty is enough to take one's breath away. I believe that it is a very real and special thing; but I am also afraid that my more ordinary experiences have not been possessed of this degree of invulnerability.

Let us return to Nephi's account for a moment (I will be abridging 2 Nephi 2:24-28). He says, by way of introducing the concept of agency, that "all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things," that "men are free according to the flesh," and "all things are given them which are expedient unto man." Finally we are admonished to "be faithful . . . and choose eternal life, according to the will of his Holy Spirit."

From my reading, this passage suggests that the doubting we so commonly experience, the very doubting that so often causes frustration and anxiety, is somehow part of God's wisdom, part of his plan for us in mortality. The process of receiving a witness of the Spirit, then forgetting or challenging it, and resolving again to be faithful and to yield to grace is a cycle that we should expect and embrace. "Faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things" (Alma 32:21). Our hesitations, it seems, are a vital part of our maturing in agency; of our becoming "adults of God" and receiving his image in our countenances (Alma 5:14) and his law written on our hearts (Jer. 31:33).

Despite the difficulty of getting specific answers to self-initiated questions in my own life, I have felt God's presence as I have made many of those decisions on my own. And I have noticed a pattern: Grant and I think about an issue and discuss it to oblivion (actually I talk and talk and he offers a lot of "hmm's" and "maybe's"); we pray—usually now for guidance and perspective rather than for answers; and then, after a while, we move ahead, doing what seems to be the "right" thing (which, I might add, is often different enough from what we had reasonably decided to give us faith in God's involvement). Although at times this process has seemed like one of spiritually giving up, perhaps it is part of God's plan after all—he won't make our decisions for us, though he will "call, persuade, direct aright" (Hymn #240). And the fact that most of these decisions have worked out successfully has greatly strengthened our faith.

This leads us to yet another response when we do not seem to get answers, and that is to question not ourselves, and not God, but to question what it is we are asking for. From my experience, it is not very often

when I am trying to channel God's usefulness (i.e., "Tell me the future!") that I am blessed with direct answers. Ultimately the faithful profession may be "I do not ask to see the distant scene" (Hymn #97), while remembering that God does care, and that our "goings are of the Lord" (Prov. 20:24). He will be there, there is a plan; but we are to do the choosing.

The journey from one kind of faith to another and back again (and again) is the task of a lifetime. It is sustained alternately by will and by revelation in an ebb and flow that is part of the dynamism of Christianity.⁸ This continual tension-state brings life; just as the church, as our living teacher, continually calls us into situations where we have to act beyond our comfort zone and rely on the Holy Ghost. This spiritual tension, for all the anxiety it causes, is our best hope for maturing as God's offspring until the time comes when our confidence waxes strong in his presence, when the Holy Ghost becomes our constant companion, and the doctrine of the priesthood distills upon our souls as the dew from heaven (D&C 121:45-46).

For all its frustrations, and all its actings upon us, the Spirit alone nourishes our strivings for eternal life and our suspicions of something more. Like Alma, I wonder if we can feel its promptings now in our life (Alma 5:26), if we can recall those times in the past when we have felt the Spirit. Make a list (even cryptic jottings will do). Keep it close to you, somewhere that you can review it often (though perhaps not in the lining of your clothes), and resolve to wait patiently for God's wisdom.

Resolve to walk in God's ways, to wilfully choose faithfulness, while joining with Pascal and John the Beloved in this testimony:

"And this is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent."

Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ. . . .

Let [us] never be cut off from him!

8. This dichotomy-driven vitality of Christianity was eloquently remarked upon by G. K. Chesterton in his religious classic *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Co., 1911), particularly in chapter 6, entitled "The Paradoxes of Christianity": "Christianity declared [that virtue] was in a conflict: the collision of two passions apparently opposite. Of course they were not really inconsistent; but they were such that it was hard to hold simultaneously. . . I began to find this duplex passion was the Christian key to ethics everywhere" (170-71). And, after several pages of examples, he concludes: "Paganism had been like a pillar of marble, upright because proportioned with symmetry. Christianity was like a huge and ragged and romantic rock, which, though it sways on its pedestal at a touch, yet, because its exaggerated excrescences exactly balance each other, is enthroned there for a thousand years . . . the wild truth reeling but erect" (182, 187).

AFTERWORD

A final note (a critique?) from Nietzsche for those who might appreciate it:

As Interpreters of Our Experiences. —One form of honesty has always been lacking among founders of religions and their kin: —they have never made their experiences a matter of the intellectual conscience. "What did I really experience? What then took place in me and around me? Was my understanding clear enough? Was my will directly opposed to all deception of the senses, and courageous in its defence against fantastic notions?" —None of them ever asked these questions, nor to this day do any of the good religious people ask them. They have rather a thirst for things which are *contrary to reason*, and they don't want to have too much difficulty in satisfying this thirst, —so they experience "miracles" and "regenerations" and hear the voices of angels! But we who are different, who are thirsty for reason, want to look as carefully into our experiences as in the case of a scientific experiment, hour by hour, day by day! We ourselves want to be our own experiments, and our own subjects of experiment.⁹

(And what of those of us with a foot in each camp? . . .)

9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Joyful Wisdom* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1960), 248; emphasis in original.