

Trajectory and Momentum

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Introduction

It is a privilege to speak to you today as your bishop, but also a responsibility that deeply humbles me. I pray that the Spirit will be with me.

First, let me address one of the most important groups in our congregation today—the Primary children. This meeting is going to be a little longer than normal, so all of you in the Primary please feel free to stand up and shake your arms for a few seconds.

While you are doing that, let me just tell you that we love you, and we love that you are here with us. We, like you, are trying to be like Jesus. We love him and our heavenly parents. We know they love us and we know they love you. Their influence and direction are at work in our Church, in our ward, and with you in the Primary.

Launch

Sisters and brothers, I want to speak today about trajectory and momentum. I'm going to start by telling you a little something about myself that you may not know: I was born on a missile range in the New Mexico desert. If you don't believe me, I can produce a birth certificate that says "White Sands Missile Range" in bold, black ink. This is *the* same missile range—code-named

“Trinity” during the Manhattan Project—that was the location of the detonation of the first atomic bomb. It’s a dubious distinction to be sure. But, besides the location, the other details of my birth are not as exciting as you might imagine. Regardless, you might wonder if being born on a nuclear missile range has had any residual side-effects. Such as, say, curly hair or absent-mindedness. My wife sometimes wonders about the latter. I suppose that there are not enough data to determine either correlation or causation. In any case, it was in this inhospitable desert setting where my mortal sojourn began or “launched,” so to speak.

Missiles are projectiles, and projectiles are defined as bodies projected or impelled forward. So you could argue that, in a literal sense, when we are born into mortality, we are all missiles—bodies impelled forward. And because missiles are in motion, they have trajectories. One of our Church’s websites says that the term “plan of salvation” is used to describe the *trajectory* of human existence. “This ‘plan’ refers to the design God has employed to help us grow, learn, and experience joy. It addresses the fundamental questions ‘Where did we come from?’ ‘Why are we here?’ and ‘Where are we going?’”¹

Although all of our mortal journeys are launched at different times, from different locations, and under different conditions, we all shared the same ultimate target—a return home to our heavenly parents.

But, man, is it a wild ride!

Trajectory

Depending on circumstances, some of our trajectories were aimed true from the get-go; whereas others of us may have started as shots in the dark. Eventually, as we became accountable, agency engaged and we began to guide our own flight path. Some of us have tried to stick more or less to the original flight plan, others of us have intentionally meandered, trying to find smoother sailing or more exciting rides, and still others of us have just recently gotten ourselves tracking in the right direction. Regardless, we all

get blown off course from time to time because the skies can be quite stormy. Like I said, it's a wild ride.

It's particularly challenging for us because we are moving objects with a first-person perspective and everything is rushing by. For the most part we can't see the forest for the trees. But it was designed this way. It had to be to protect our autonomous guidance systems (our agency) so we could learn how to fly. And this requires a huge leap of faith.

Faith

As we read in both Hebrews and Alma, faith is the assurance of things hoped for.² Faith is a stabilizing control that we can acquire on our life trajectory. And when we acquire it, the circumstances that have brought it to us grant us a feeling of assurance of the things for which we hope. And for what do we hope? We hope for the redemption of our bodies,³ for a continuing relationship with our loved ones,⁴ and for a reunion with our God.⁷ When we feel assured of this, we have faith. Faith is a feeling of assurance of salvation. And it is inseparably connected to the atonement of Jesus Christ. Isn't it true that every time we have a powerful spiritual experience, we get a glimpse of the love of God and Jesus Christ through it?

Brothers and sisters, I feel strongly that both individually and collectively as a ward we need to solidify our foundation of faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The journey is a long one, and faith is a fragile thing. In a world of confusion, with a continuous barrage of opinions, challenges, and distractions, it's easy to [get] fatigue[d] and feel like we're losing our way. To quote lyrics from an R.E.M. song:

The walls are built up, stone by stone
The fields divided one by one.
And the train conductor says,
Take a break Driver 8, Driver 8 take a break
We've been on this shift too long
And the train conductor says,

Take a break Driver 8, Driver 8 take a break
We can reach our destination,
but we're still a ways away.⁸

Faith Challenges

We all need to take regular, periodic breaks from our busy schedules to recharge our faith. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, it's easy to fail to recharge our faith and let it gradually slip through our fingers. Or, in other circumstances, to have "sore trials [come] upon [us]" that endeavor to wrench it from our hands.⁷ Whatever the reasons behind our personal challenges of faith, surely God is empathetic and not offended by our sincere questions or our feeble knees. "To some it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he was crucified for the sins of the world. To others it is given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful."⁸

Based on this scripture, LDS scholars Terryl and Fiona Givens observe that "it would appear God is suggesting that the grounds for a reasoned devotion to the gospel are available [even] to those who doubt. . . . [T]he Lord apparently anticipates—and validates (as have Latter-day Saint apostles in recent remarks)—those who don't feel the full light of spiritual illumination or revelation."⁹ In a much-quoted general conference address, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf assures:

It's natural to have questions—the acorn of honest inquiry has often sprouted and matured into a great oak of understanding. There are few members of the Church who, at one time or another, have not wrestled with serious or sensitive questions. One of the purposes of the Church is to nurture and cultivate the seed of faith—even in the sometimes sandy soil of doubt and uncertainty. Faith is to hope for things which are not seen but which are true.

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters—my dear friends—please, first doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith. We

must never allow doubt to hold us prisoner and keep us from the divine love, peace, and gifts that come through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . Regardless of your circumstances, your personal history, or the strength of your testimony, there is room for you in this Church.¹⁰

Choice

How do we then endeavor to recharge our faith or rebuild it in the face of uncertainties? The first step is to exercise our agency; we must make a choice of what to believe. It is a choice between hope and fear. And we must be careful not to make this choice out of fear disguised as practicality, because it is neither practical nor easy to choose to believe. We must dare to hope for the reality of the epic, beautiful, loving, grandeur of the gospel message more than fearing what the possible risk of embracing it in error might pose.

Brother and Sister Givens suggest that

In the perpetual absence of certainty, one may still choose to embrace, and live by a set of propositions that are aesthetically, morally, and rationally appealing. . . . One might focus on the message rather than the messenger.¹¹

One might consider that the contingencies of history and culture and the human element will always constitute the garment in which God's word and will are clothed. And one might refuse to allow our desire for the perfect to be the enemy of the present good. And finally we might ask ourselves, with the early disciples "to whom [else] shall we go?"¹²

Scottish author, poet, and Christian minister George MacDonald proclaims:

Even if there be no hereafter, I would live my time believing in a grand thing that ought to be true if it is not. No facts can take the place of truths, and if these be not truths, then is the loftiest part of our nature a waste. Let me hold by the better than

the actual, and fall into nothingness off the same precipice with Jesus and John and Paul and a thousand more, who were lovely in their lives, and with their death make even the nothingness into which they have passed like the garden of the Lord. I will go further . . . and say, I would rather die for evermore believing as Jesus believed, than live for evermore believing as those that deny him.¹³

Recharge

Once we choose to believe (or reaffirm our choice to believe) we need to get to work realigning our trajectory of faith; to nourish it with great care as Alma says.¹⁴

Our trajectories need almost constant micro-adjustments. This is where our ward goals of prayer and scripture study can help. Moroni writes, “They were numbered among the people of the church of Christ . . . that they might be remembered and nourished by the good word of God, to keep them in the right way, to keep them continually watchful unto prayer, relying alone upon the merits of Christ, who was the author and the finisher of their faith.”¹⁵

Why are these seemingly rote and basic endeavors of scripture study and prayer so vital to our trajectories? Because as President Henry B. Eyring put it, “We all know that human judgment and logical thinking will not be enough to get answers to the questions that matter most in life. We need revelation from God. And we will need not just one revelation in a time of stress, but we need a constantly renewed stream. We need not just one flash of light and comfort, but we need the continuing blessing of communication with God.”¹⁶

The Psalmist wrote, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.”¹⁷ Nephi wrote, “For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost, as well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore, the course of the Lord is one eternal round.”¹⁸

We can rally around each other and support each other as we endeavor to weave the scriptures more fully into our lives this year. Our lone seminary student is studying the Doctrine and Covenants this year. In order to support him in his reading assignments, the other young men and Young Men leaders have committed to reading the assignments along with him each week. We can all make similar collective efforts at a family or ward level to make the scriptures an integral part of our lives; many of us ought to be able to carve out at least a fraction of the amount of time we spend on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram and divert it to the scriptures.

Momentum

Once we get our trajectories adjusted, we need to build momentum. My son and I were snowboarding the other day, and a friend of his was at the same mountain. This friend stayed the whole day in an almost flat beginner area just trying to learn to stay upright. Anxious for his friend to make progress so they could eventually ride together, my son said, “Dad, you know, it’s actually easier once you go up on the lift and the hill gets a little steeper. It’s much easier to turn once you get going.” This is so true. I used to play this snowboarding video game called *SSX Tricky*. In the game, as you raced down the mountain, you had to make your avatar perform trick maneuvers to earn boost points that would make you go faster. If you didn’t do any tricks, your run wouldn’t be fast enough to win the race. So, along with the constant chorus of Run-D.M.C.’s “It’s Tricky” playing in the background, there was a voice that would constantly remind you, “You gotta trick to boost!”¹⁹ It is the same with our journeys of faith. Faith can be tricky; to build momentum, you gotta trick to boost.

In this case the “tricks” may not be that flashy. They include fulfilling responsibilities such as home and visiting teaching assignments, serving in our callings, and also the elevated spiritual devotion of attending the temple regularly. Last but not least is the boost we get from turning away from ourselves and toward others—turning inside-out.

Turning Inside-out

Often in the Church we talk about how after faith, repentance, baptism, and confirmation, it's all about enduring to the end. And there is truth in this, but an overly-literal, white-knuckled interpretation of this endurance would frustrate continued progress and be awfully dull.

Eleanor Roosevelt said, "The purpose of life, after all, is to live it, to taste experience to the utmost, to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experiences."²⁰ I believe the richest and most ennobling experiences in life come from deeply positive interactions with other people.

Our families, our ward, and our communities-at-large can be compared to balls of rubber bands. "Human communities are not one solid, continuous thing—they are made of many individuals, all of whom have to be able to adapt to the needs of the community while still protecting their own interests. A resilient human community, will create itself using patterns and principles that allow the community to absorb shocks and losses, respond quickly, and repair damage or adapt to new circumstances."²¹ This is where our second ward goal—to *pray every day that we are the answer to another's prayer*—becomes applicable.

In an open letter to fellow clergymen, penned while he was in the Birmingham City Jail, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. observed, "Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality. We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now."²² On a different occasion, he preached: "The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But . . . the good Samaritan reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?' Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"²³

Joseph Smith said:

Kindness is our religion.

When persons manifest the least kindness and love to me, O what power it has over my mind, while the opposite course has a tendency to harrow up all the harsh feelings and depress the human mind.²⁴

Love is one of the chief characteristics of Deity, and ought to be manifested by those who aspire to be the sons of God. A man filled with the love of God, is not content with blessing his family alone, but ranges through the whole world, anxious to bless the whole human race.²⁵

Comedian Jim Carrey, an unlikely fountain of wisdom, said, “I can tell you from experience that the effect you have on others is the most valuable currency there is.”²⁶

Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote: “To love someone means to see him as God intended him.”²⁷

And finally the Lord Jesus Christ admonished, “Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith, and let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distill upon thy soul as the dews from heaven. The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion.”²⁸

Conclusion

Sisters and brothers, we are all on a faith journey. Where we are on that journey is not important. What is important is where our trajectory is taking us and whether or not we are maintaining momentum. Scriptures and prayer will help strengthen our faith and stabilize our trajectories. Pushing others ahead or letting them draft behind us will counterintuitively increase our own momentum. “You gotta trick to boost.” We’ll shoot for the moon, and even if we miss, at least we’ll have gotten out of the pews and little bit closer to heaven.

I’ll end with what I told the Primary children at the beginning. We are trying to be like Jesus. We love him and our heavenly parents. I know they love us. The gospel of Jesus Christ is true.

The Savior's influence and direction are at work in our Church and in our ward. May we draw ever closer to him.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Notes

1. "Plan of Salvation," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Newsroom, accessed January 23, 2015, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/plan-of-salvation>.
2. Hebrews 11:1; Alma 32:21.
3. Romans 8:23–25.
4. Doctrine and Covenants 130:2; Doctrine and Covenants 2.
5. Doctrine and Covenants 45:3–5.
6. R.E.M., "Driver 8" (I.R.S. Records, 1985).
7. "Did You Think to Pray?" *Hymns*, no. 140.
8. Doctrine and Covenants 46:13–14.
9. Terry Givens and Fiona Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 138.
10. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Come, Join with Us," October 2013, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us?lang=eng> (accessed September 25, 2015).
11. Givens and Givens, *Crucible of Doubt*, 138.
12. *Ibid.*, 140.
13. George MacDonald, *Thomas Wingfold, Curate* (London: Hurst and Blackette, 1876), 65–66. This passage is also cited in Givens and Givens, *Crucible of Doubt*, 138–39.
14. Alma 32:37.
15. Moroni 6:4.
16. Henry B. Eyring, "Continuing Revelation," October 2014, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2014/10/continuing-revelation?lang=eng> (accessed September 25, 2015).
17. Psalm 119:105.
18. 1 Nephi 10:19.
19. *SSX Tricky*, EA Sports Big, November 2001.

20. Eleanor Roosevelt, "Eleanor Roosevelt," in *Wit and Wisdom of America's First Ladies: A Book of Quotations*, edited by Joslyn Pine (New York: Dover, 2014), 27.

21. Orson Scott Card, "Uncle Orson Reviews Everything—Churchill Factor, Burning Room, Defending Jacob," review of *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back* by Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy, January 15, 2015, <http://www.hatrack.com/osc/reviews/everything/2015-01-15.shtml>.

22. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963.

23. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountain Top," speech delivered at Mason Temple, Memphis, Tennessee, April 3, 1968.

24. *History of the Church*, 5:23–24

25. *Ibid.*, 4:227; also published as "Extract from an Epistle to the Elders in England," *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 5 (January 1, 1841): 258.

26. Jim Carrey, "Commencement Address," Maharishi University of Management, May 24, 2014. Full video and transcript available online at <https://www.mum.edu/whats-happening/graduation-2014/full-jim-carrey-address-video-and-transcript>.

27. Accessed January 20, 2015, http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/3137322.Fyodor_Dostoyevsky.

28. Doctrine and Covenants 121:45.