

LEARNING AND LATTER-DAY SAINTS



The acquisition of knowledge is a lifelong, sacred activity, pleasing to our Father in Heaven and favored by His servants.

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He who invades the domain of knowledge must approach it as Moses came to the burning bush; he stands on holy ground; he would acquire things sacred,” said President J. Reuben Clark Jr. (1871–1961), a member of the First Presidency, speaking at the inauguration of a new president of Brigham Young University. “We must come to this quest of truth—in all regions of human knowledge whatsoever, not only in reverence, but with a spirit of worship.”¹

As Latter-day Saints we believe in education, and we have a philosophy about how and why we should pursue it. Our religious faith teaches us that we should seek learning by the Spirit and that we have a stewardship to use our knowledge for the benefit of mankind.

Our Quest for Truth

“[Our] religion . . . prompts [us] to search diligently after knowledge,” taught President Brigham Young (1801–77). “There is no other people in existence more eager to see, hear, learn and understand truth.”²

Our quest for truth should be as broad as our life’s activities and as deep as our circumstances permit. A learned Latter-day Saint should seek to understand the important religious, physical, social, and political problems of the day. The more knowledge we have of heavenly laws and earthly things, the greater influence we can exert for



good on those around us and the safer we will be from scurrilous and evil influences that may confuse and destroy us.

In our quest for truth, we need to seek the help of our loving Heavenly Father. His Spirit can direct and intensify our efforts to learn and magnify our ability to assimilate truth. This learning with the Spirit is not confined to classrooms or preparation for school examinations. It applies to everything we do in life and every place we do it—at home, at work, and at church.

As we seek to receive and apply the guidance of the Spirit in a world driven by the trends and issues of the day, we are confronted by an avalanche of often erroneous and trivial information served up by modern technology. We risk becoming what one observer called “pancake people”—spread wide and thin as we connect with that vast network of information accessed by the mere touch of a button.”³

We are also bombarded by popular talk show hosts, television psychologists, fashion magazines, and media commentators, whose skewed values and questionable practices can drive our opinions and influence our behavior. For example, President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) said, “There has never been a time in the world when the role of [women and men] has been more confused.”⁴



In this circumstance, confusion, discouragement, or self-doubt may begin to erode our faith and turn us away from the Savior and from building His kingdom on earth. If we focus our decisions on trends and worldly directions, we will be “tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive” (Ephesians 4:14).

Not influenced by popular opinion, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches principles. The difference is profound. Trends, fashion, and pop ideology are fleeting and ephemeral. Principles serve as anchors of security,



direction, and truth. If we fix our ideals and direction on doctrine and principles, such as faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and following the prophet, we will have a totally reliable, unchanging guide for our life’s decisions.⁵

We need not fear. President Henry B. Eyring, First Counselor in the First Presidency, taught: “The Lord knows both what He will need you to do and what you will need to

know. He is kind and He is all-knowing. So you can with confidence expect that He has prepared opportunities for you to learn in preparation for the service you will give. You will not recognize those opportunities perfectly. . . . But when you put the spiritual things first in your life, you will be blessed to feel directed toward certain learning, and you will be motivated to work harder.”⁶

Personal Worthiness

Our efforts to learn must be combined with personal worthiness for us to receive the guidance of the Holy Ghost. We must avoid sexual impurity, pornography, and

addictions as well as negative feelings against others or ourselves. Sin drives out the Spirit of the Lord, and when that happens, the special illumination of the Spirit is gone and the lamp of learning flickers.

In modern revelation we have a promise that if our eye be single to the glory of God, which includes personal worthiness, our “whole [body] shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in [us]; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things” (D&C 88:67).

We can verify this eternal principle by immediate personal experience. Recall a time when you were resentful, contentious, or quarrelsome. Could you study effectively? Did you receive any enlightenment during that period?

Sin and anger darken the mind. They produce a condition opposite to the light and truth that characterize intelligence, which is the glory of God (see D&C 93:36). Repentance, which can cleanse us from sin through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, is therefore an essential step along the path of learning for all who seek light and truth through the teaching power of the Holy Ghost.

We are imperfect beings, but each of us can strive to be more worthy of the companionship of the Spirit, which will magnify our personal discernment and prepare us to better defend the truth, to withstand social pressures, and to make positive contributions.

Education

In our educational choices we should prepare to support ourselves and those who may become dependent upon us. It is necessary that we have marketable skills. Education is mandatory to personal security and well-being.

Our Heavenly Father expects us to use our agency and inspiration to examine ourselves and our abilities and decide the educational course we should follow. This is especially important for young people who have finished high school and missionary service and now face decisions about further schooling and employment. Since the choices facing men and women can be quite different,

we begin by drawing on our contrasting experiences, believing them to be typical of many Latter-day Saints.

Elder Oaks: Like those of most young men, my formal educational pursuits were intense, continuous, and motivated by the need to qualify myself to support a family. College was followed by graduate school. This was financed by part-time work and borrowing to be repaid from the increased earning capacity acquired from the education. Along the way I married, and we began to have children. The support of a wife and the responsibility of a growing family enhanced my performance in school and gave me powerful motivation to graduate and go forward with my life's work. With the conclusion of my formal education, I devoted some of my newfound discretionary time to continuing education in my profession and to additional reading in long-desired areas of Church history and general education.



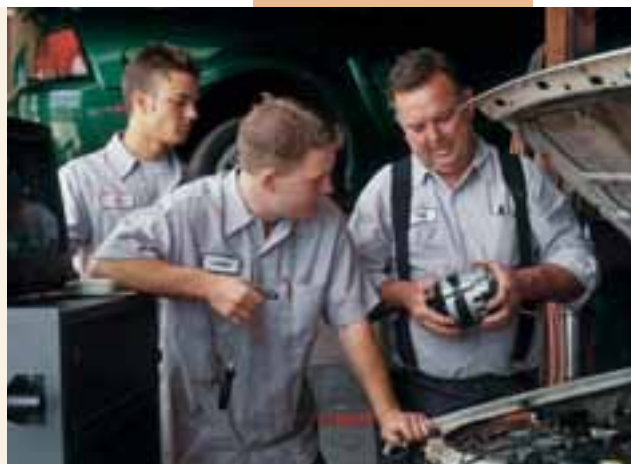
Sister Oaks: Women's educational paths and experiences are often very different from men's.

I grew up in a time when women seemed to have only two options to support themselves—teaching and nursing. My “problem” was that I never considered either one of them. Supporting myself financially was something I did not consider possible or necessary. I loved to learn, and I knew how to work; in fact, I loved to work. I had many summer jobs, and I did well in school. When I awoke to the fact that I needed to support myself fully, I was afraid, almost paralyzed, by the unforeseen challenges that seemed to loom ahead for me. I had no real job skills. My studies in liberal arts had fed my soul, but now I needed to feed my pocketbook.

I attended graduate school to learn skills to support myself. I loved every minute of learning and encountered not only new ideas but discovered my own capabilities. Where I had felt shy and somewhat vulnerable, I now felt capable and competent to face life on my own.

Crossroads

We know that nothing is more perplexing than not knowing what to do with your future, but nothing is more personally rewarding than discovering your own abilities. Read your patriarchal blessing, consider your natural aptitudes and talents, and go forward. Take the first step, and doors will open. For example, when Sister Oaks set out in English literature, she never dreamed it would take her to a publishing house in Boston. When Elder Oaks studied accounting, he never supposed it would take him



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to legal education, to Brigham Young University, and then to the Utah Supreme Court. With the Lord, “all things work together for [our] good” (Romans 8:28), and the education we receive comes in incremental steps as our lives unfold before us.

We must choose our learning with care because learning has an eternal shelf life, and whatever useful knowledge or wisdom

or “principle of intelligence” we acquire in this life “will rise with us in the resurrection” (D&C 130:18).

It is disturbing that so many, especially women, have self-doubts and question their ability to succeed. Addressing female students studying math, science, and engineering in March 2005, BYU president Elder Cecil O. Samuelson Jr. of the Seventy said: “One of your professors has commented to me . . . that some of you have less confidence in your abilities and prospects than do your male peers, even when the evidence may suggest that this is not justified. You do need to recognize your talents, skills, aptitudes, and strengths and not be confused about the gifts that God has given you.”⁷

Women especially may receive negative feedback when they aspire to professional occupations. A young sister entering her late 20s and faced with supporting herself wrote for advice. She confided that she had

approached an ecclesiastical authority about studying law and he had discouraged her. We do not know her abilities or her limitations; the counsel she received may have been based on them or on inspiration peculiar to her circumstances. But her determination could be felt through the pages of her letter, and it was clear that she should be advised to reach the full level of her potential.

President Thomas S. Monson, as part of his message during the general Relief Society meeting held on September 29, 2007, told women: “Do not pray for tasks equal to your abilities, but pray for abilities equal to your tasks. Then the performance of your tasks will be no miracle, but you will be the miracle.”⁸

We caution that with the need to finish school and establish financial security, men or women might be tempted to assign marriage a low priority. It is eternally shortsighted to pursue a professional course that makes one unavailable for marriage, an eternal value, because it does not fit into professional timing, a worldly value.

A friend accompanied her daughter to look at graduate schools in the eastern United States. Her highly motivated and



talented daughter knew that by attending the number-one school of her choice, she would incur enormous debts for her education. Often the best education is worth paying for, but in this case, her daughter prayed and felt that while a high level of debt might not prevent her from marrying, it might eventually prevent her from stopping work so she could stay home with her children. Be wise. Each of us is different. If you seek His counsel, the Lord will let you know what is best for you.

Hunger to Learn

Elder Jay E. Jensen of the Presidency of the Seventy has taught that we always need “to keep a learning, growing edge.”⁹ That edge must be honed by a desire to learn, directed by eternal priorities.

Beyond increasing our occupational qualifications, we should desire to learn how to become more emotionally fulfilled, more skilled in our personal relationships, and better parents and citizens. There are few things more fulfilling and fun than learning something new. Great happiness, satisfaction, and financial rewards come from this. An education is not limited to formal study. Lifelong learning can increase our ability to appreciate and relish the workings and beauty of the world around us. This kind of learning goes well beyond books and a selective use of new technology, such as the Internet. It includes artistic endeavors. It also includes experiences with people and places: conversations with friends, visits to museums and concerts, and opportunities for service. We should expand ourselves and enjoy the journey.

We may have to struggle to achieve our goals, but our struggles may yield as much growth as our learning. The strengths we develop in overcoming challenges will be with us in the eternities to come. We should not envy those whose financial or intellectual resources make it easy. The stuff of growth was never made of ease, and persons who have it easy will need to experience their growth with other sacrifices or forego the advancement that is the purpose of life.

Most important, we have the obligation to continue our spiritual education by studying the scriptures and Church literature and by attending church and the temple. Feasting on the words of life will enrich us, increase our ability to teach those we love, and prepare us for eternal life.

The ultimate goal of an education is to make us better parents and servants in the kingdom. In the long run it is the growth, knowledge, and wisdom we achieve that



enlarges our souls and prepares us for eternity, not the marks on college transcripts. The things of the Spirit are the things that are eternal, and our family relationships, sealed by the power of the priesthood, are the ultimate fruits of the Spirit. Education is a gift from God; it is a cornerstone of our religion when we use it to benefit others. ■

NOTES

1. J. Reuben Clark Jr., “Charge to President Howard S. McDonald,” *Improvement Era*, Jan. 1946, 15.
2. “Remarks by President Brigham Young,” *Deseret News*, Mar. 14, 1860, 11.
3. Richard Foreman, quoted in Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” *Atlantic Monthly*, July/Aug. 2008, 63.
4. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball* (Melchizedek Priesthood and Relief Society course of study, 2006), 222.
5. The substance of this paragraph and several other paragraphs later in the article is taken from Kristen M. Oaks, *A Single Voice* (2008).
6. Henry B. Eyring, “Education for Real Life,” *Ensign*, Oct. 2002, 18–19.
7. Cecil O. Samuelson Jr., “What Will Be Relevant,” unpublished talk.
8. Thomas S. Monson, “Three Goals to Guide You,” *Liahona and Ensign*, Nov. 2007, 120.
9. Letter from Jay E. Jensen to Dallin H. Oaks, dated Apr. 23, 2008.