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The Education of the Heart

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The Education of the Heart

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I love the words to the song our choir
just performed:

*Write [thy] blessed name, O Lord,
upon my heart
There to remain so indelibly engraved
that no prosperity or adversity
shall ever move me from thy love.*
[D. Grotenhuis and Thomas à Kempis
(Dayton, Ohio: The Sacred Music Press, 1991)]

When Thomas à Kempis penned those lines more than 500 years ago, he was in one sense talking about education—the kind of education that can occur at this university in a way that can occur at no other because we believe that all truth is tied together and that when we learn a new truth, whether in a course on religion, mathematics, or physical education, that truth will strengthen our testimony of the Creator (who said, “I am the truth” [see John 14:6]) and engrave his name ever more indelibly upon our heart.

When we understand truth in this way, we need not worry about separating secular learning from religious learning—we need only worry about separating truth from error. As Brigham Young said:

Take the whole truth wherever you find it. It is good; claim it, take it to yourself, and cleave to it, for it will do you good. Cease to separate truth from truth. [JD 8:260]

And, as Joseph Fielding Smith confirmed:

There never was and never will be any conflict between truth revealed by the Lord to his servants, the prophets, and truth revealed by him to the scientist, who makes his discoveries through his research and study. [GD, p. 86]

Why, then, do we struggle at times with the blending of the sacred and the secular? If truth is truth, how can there be a conflict? And if “truth tastes so good,” as the Prophet Joseph taught (see *Teachings*, p. 355), how could a student or a teacher ever lose interest in a course—if it’s really truth that we are learning and teaching?

The longer I have considered the question of how teaching and learning should occur

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in my own classroom, the more I have come to believe that the question extends far beyond my own experience as a professor at BYU. I believe the question applies to all of us—students, staff, and administrators, as well as faculty. We might all ask ourselves: As one who knows that the gospel of Jesus Christ has been restored in its fullness, how should I go about learning and how should I teach—not only here on this campus, but in the Church, in my home, and in my personal studies for as long as I live?

Before coming to BYU as students, you completed thirteen years of education—most commonly in public schools. You were among those who succeeded in these schools, but I'm sure you were acquainted with students who were not so successful. A high school principal told me recently:

I worry a lot about the students we have to suspend from our school for unacceptable behavior, but I worry even more about the students who feel left out, the ones who are on the margins; they don't feel like they fit in, like they have a real place in our school. [Linda Sandstrom, personal communication, 20 January 1995]

Nearly all of us are acquainted with someone who is not succeeding as a student—school may be a place of boredom or a place of pain but not a place of learning. And in some cases neither is the student's home. For so many, education is something to get out of, rather than something to get into. Many have called it an educational crisis, but it is much more than a crisis of pedagogy or standardized test scores—or even of illiteracy. If Thomas à Kempis were alive today, I think that he might call it a crisis of the heart. We are reminded every day that knowledge alone will not suffice, that we can be “ever learning, and never

able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7).

So what is the answer? A crisis of the heart demands that we look at teaching and learning anew, that as students and teachers we not confine ourselves to the models we have experienced in our own education. If we want to rediscover what it means to learn and to teach, we need to bathe ourselves in the light of the Restoration.

The scriptures teach us that, like the soul, the heart encompasses both the body and the spirit (see Alma 32:28)—the heart is the very center of our being. We “rejoice” with our heart (D&C 97:21); we “ponder” with our heart (see Luke 2:19); we “understand” with our heart (John 12:40). It is our heart that is “humble” (see Alma 42:30); it is with our heart that we “discern” (1 Kings 3:9) and are “edified” (see D&C 50:23); and it is with our heart that we experience “reverence” (see 1 Peter 3:15), “inspiration” (see Alma 43:48), and “joy” (2 Nephi 1:21). Yet these are not the terms we typically use to describe the ways most of us teach and learn. If anything, we reserve them for the learning that takes place within the walls of our churches and temples, but not within the walls of our classrooms and homes.

How would our present approaches to learning and teaching change if we considered what it means to educate the heart?

The Prophet Joseph's account of his own personal search for truth has much to teach us about education. Joseph spent little time in formal schooling, and yet he learned more in his short life than any of his contemporaries. The following excerpts from his personal history remind us that Joseph's learning began with a question, a question that arose out of confusion:

During this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection and

great uneasiness; but though my feelings were deep and often poignant, still I kept myself aloof from all these parties, though I attended their several meetings as often as occasion would permit. . . . But so great were the confusion and strife among the different denominations, that it was impossible for a person young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong. . . .

While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."

Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did. [JS—H 1:8, 11–12]

Joseph's "mind was called up to serious reflection," but the message of the scripture came with power to his heart. Like Joseph, when we yearn for answers and for wholeness, we ask questions that demand our personal response. And only when we ask such questions will our most important learning occur.

How do such questions arise? How do they develop? Joseph's experience suggests that they come from deep within us. They are not surface questions like so many of us ask as teachers or students.

Joseph's account teaches us that reaching inside the mind or inside a book will never fully satisfy a question of the heart; we must eventually reach outward to others and upward to God. Our family members and friends—those who know us best—are often

most prepared to help us in our search, as Joseph's family helped him. The story of Lorenzo Odone, a six-year-old boy who developed adrenoleukodystrophy (ALD), a rare fatal genetic disease, powerfully portrays the connection between family and questions of the heart.

The story opens when Lorenzo begins having trouble at school. Teachers meet with Lorenzo's parents, Michaela and Augusto, and explain that Lorenzo is often unresponsive in the classroom and should be placed in a special education program. Unconvinced that Lorenzo has a problem, the Odone's argue that with the proper attention, Lorenzo will do fine in the regular classroom. But then Michaela notices some of the behavior problems at home. Lorenzo begins having accidents around the house, and when he plays outside with his friends, he seems to have difficulty at times controlling his arms and legs.

The Odone's begin to worry that something is seriously wrong with their child, but when they take Lorenzo in for a medical examination, the physicians are unable to identify the problem. After a series of frustrating visits to the hospital, Michaela and Augusto finally find a physician who diagnoses Lorenzo's disease as ALD, a disease that strips away the myelin—the insulating tissue that surrounds the nerve endings. The doctor explains that there is no cure for the disease, that the medical profession is just beginning to understand what it is. The Odone's plead with the doctor; they tell him that they will take Lorenzo anywhere for special treatment—anywhere they can find someone who is working on a cure. But the physician cannot help them. He looks over his desk at them and simply shakes his head, indicating that neither he nor anyone else can provide the help Lorenzo needs.

The next day Augusto goes to the local library and begins reading about ALD. He finds that the disease often leads to death within two years of diagnosis and that before the child dies, he gradually loses control of bodily functions, often experiencing blindness, deafness, and complete loss of speech and mobility. Augusto and Michaela cry out for help; they begin searching for answers to their son's problem. They seek help from God, as well as from the medical profession.

The Odones know that their time is short. They know that if they do not respond quickly, Lorenzo will die. As they continue to study the disease, they find that ALD makes it impossible for the body to digest fatty acids and that the rise in fatty-acid levels gradually destroys not only the body's myelin but all of the vital organs. The Odones' question becomes "How can we lower Lorenzo's levels of fatty acids?" After months of intensive study and personal prayer, they light upon the idea of using oleic acid, an extract from olive oil. When they administer the oleic acid to Lorenzo, they find that his fatty-acid levels indeed decrease, but the decrease plateaus at the halfway mark.

They watch in anguish as Lorenzo's condition deteriorates. Michaela, his mother, devotes herself so completely to his care that she begins to forget her own physical needs. At a point of deep discouragement, Augusto convinces Michaela that she must continue on and that they must extend their search for a cure to Lorenzo's illness.

Augusto returns to the library, studying all the scientific literature he can find on long-chain fatty acids. His search is intense; he thinks about Lorenzo's problem day and night. When his research fails to yield what he is looking for, he becomes frustrated and knows that he needs help from others who are seeking a cure for ALD. He and

Michaela begin working with a medical researcher who is conducting studies on ALD; they appreciate his help but do not believe that he is bold enough to try new approaches. Augusto returns to the library again and again; the librarian becomes an important resource for Augusto, supplying him with scientific studies on long-chain fatty acids. Augusto begins building models of the fatty acids so that he can visualize what is happening inside Lorenzo's body.

After months of research, Augusto hypothesizes that an extract from rapeseed oil might be effective at reducing Lorenzo's fatty acids to normal levels. But then he finds that this oil is not approved for human consumption in the U.S., so he is unable to convince an American firm to produce the substance for him. Finally, he finds a chemist in England who agrees to help him. He is close to retirement but agrees to extract the substance from rapeseed oil so that Augusto can try it with Lorenzo. When the Odones receive the oil from the British chemist, Lorenzo's condition has already deteriorated significantly. They try the oil nonetheless and find that it indeed reduces Lorenzo's fatty acids to normal levels.

Although the Odones lived more than a century and a half after Joseph Smith, the two stories have some common threads. As was true for the Odones, Joseph's question sprang from the center of his being; in neither case was the question imposed from the outside. Neither teachers nor parents came to Joseph or to the Odones and *assigned* them to answer the question. In both cases the question arose out of love—in Joseph's case a love for God, and in the Odones' case a love for their son, Lorenzo. And both stories powerfully portray how the question laid claim on the person; neither Joseph nor the Odones could rest until they had found their answer.

Questions of the heart emerge on their own; we don't sit down one day and decide to create them. They come through the natural course of living the way God wants us to live. But once a question comes, it demands our full attention—we are compelled to action. We cannot rest, we cannot feel peace until we have found the answer or the answer has found us. We must lie in wait at times, wondering if the answer is obtainable. But then, without warning, it arrives—often in a form we did not expect, usually in a way that teaches us more than we set out to learn.

The search for truth demands that we have faith, that we ponder and pray, and that we open ourselves to guidance from others and from God. Such effort requires our utmost commitment, our maximum energy, our whole being. It is not a search in which we can enter and exit when a bell rings in a school building or when a class starts and stops or when a semester begins and ends. Once we have taken our first step on the path, we must follow it to its conclusion.

What I am suggesting is that teaching and learning seldom proceed in this way. Seldom do we follow our own questions, seldom do we exercise our faith as we should in the learning process, seldom do we ponder and pray over our learning as Christ asked the Nephites to do (3 Nephi 17:3), and seldom do we open ourselves to the kind of guidance we need as learners and teachers. I believe that only when we do these things will we experience the kind of education the Lord desires for us—only then will we receive an education that will fit us for eternity.

We often say that we came to BYU to “get” an education. But the education of the heart is not something we can “get.” It comes to us indirectly as a free gift when we follow the Lord's will for us. As Arthur Henry King reminds us:

One of the mistakes we make over and over again in life is to go directly for the things we think are important. But if we aim at self-fulfillment, we shall never be fulfilled. If we aim at education, we shall never become educated. If we aim at salvation, we shall never be saved. These things are indirect, supreme results of doing something else; and the something else is service, it is righteousness, it is trying to do the right thing, the thing that needs to be done at each moment. [The Abundance of the Heart (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), p. 255]

For this very reason I've often wondered if the sign at the entrance to campus that says “Enter to learn, go forth to serve” should be reversed: “Enter to serve, go forth to learn.” Too often formal learning, the way it is now carried out, points us inward and causes us to forget the needs of our neighbor. But the education of the heart is always connected in some way to service. Joseph was compelled to share what he had learned, first with his family and then with “every nation, kindred, tongue, and people” (Mosiah 3:20). The Odone's likewise shared their discoveries first with their own son, later with other parents of ALD children, and finally with the entire medical community.

I do not pretend to know all of what it means to educate the heart, but I find it helpful to think of the process in three stages: the question, the search, and the fruits. Joseph's question led him into the grove, but his questioning did not end there. His entire life could be characterized as one of continual searching. Again and again he questioned, studied, exercised his faith, pondered, prayed, and sought guidance. The Odone's continued their search as well until they found a cure for Lorenzo's disease. Their search was not an easy one. They wondered at times if they would ever succeed, if they were really capable of

finding the cure they were looking for. But finally, with help from family and others who became their friends, their answer came.

The world often measures the quality of education by direct results—by the wealth, position, or fame that comes to someone. In formal education we often look for improved standardized test scores, higher self-esteem, critical thinking skills, or self-awareness. But the fruits of the heart’s education are much greater than these worldly markers. As I have said, these fruits are indirect gifts that come from questioning and searching in the right way. There are many such fruits. I will mention six that I believe are the most central.

First, *sensibility*. When I was a young father, I remember rushing my five-year-old son to the emergency room, where a plastic surgeon was waiting to stitch a gash in my son’s scalp that had resulted from a biking accident. The doctor allowed me to observe the entire treatment. What caught my attention were the doctor’s hands as he cleaned the debris from under my son’s scalp. He would move his thumb over the top of the scalp, feel a protrusion, lift up the skin and remove the particle of dirt or small pebble. He would then wash the wound and again use his thumb to feel for any remaining debris. I later decided that we had paid the doctor not so much for his ability to stitch up cuts, but for the sense of touch he had developed in his thumb. We were grateful for the doctor’s *sensibility* (see 2 Nephi 2:11).

If I were to search through a stack of current books on education, I am confident I would not find the word *sensibility* in any of them. And yet it is one of the most important fruits of a good education. The term refers not only to one’s ability to “perceive through the senses” (as the plastic surgeon used his sense of touch to clean my son’s wound). It also includes one’s ability to become aware of others’ needs, to feel

sympathy for another human being, and to perceive things clearly without confusion—to “make sense” of our world.

The education of the heart unifies our sensibilities so that we experience wholeness instead of fragmentation, clarity instead of confusion. Not only can we discern more readily between good and evil, we can see anew what we have seen before, hear anew what we have heard before, and know again what we have known before.

Second, *reverence*. As our power of discernment grows, our reverence for the Lord, his creations, and his children deepens. *Reverence* is another word I would have difficulty finding in books on teaching and learning. If anything, many educators often value *irreverence* because they believe that it shows one’s ability to think critically. Just as the children of Israel gradually lost their sense of reverence for manna (see Numbers 11:1–15), so many today also have lost their sense of reverence for God’s gifts to them.

This is one reason, I believe, President Kimball used to urge all the Saints to grow a garden. My father has always followed this prophetic counsel. In addition to growing vegetables, every summer my father grows a wide variety of strawflowers, harvests them, hangs them upside down to dry, and then spends the winter months preparing and arranging them. And his Parkinson’s disease has not slowed my father’s propensity to plant and to harvest. In fact, I have wondered if the flowers have actually slowed the progress of the disease. When I see his flower arrangements, I am reminded of the reverence my father has for life, and for beauty, and for the Giver of these precious gifts.

The education of the heart leads to a deeper reverence for all creation, for others, and for God as we form questions and search for answers. We are reminded that learning is a sacred act. As J. Reuben Clark said:

The gaining of knowledge is not to be like the commonplace work of earning a livelihood. 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; he seeks to make his own the attributes of Deity. . . . 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. [“Charge to President Howard S. McDonald at His Inauguration as President of the Brigham Young University,” *Improvement Era*, January 1946, p. 15; emphasis added]

Third, *humility*. Because learning is a form of repentance, we will always be humbled when we give up a false idea and embrace truth. As Alma taught Corianton, we must “let the justice of God, and his mercy, and his long-suffering have full sway in [our] heart; and let it bring [us] down to the dust in humility” (Alma 42:30).

Submission is an important part of humility. When we submit ourselves to truth, the unfamiliar takes on meaning and the uncomfortable begins to feel like home. At the beginning of their search for a cure to ALD, the Odones were intimidated by the scientific and medical worlds. The new scientific terms, the federal regulations, and the traditions of professional associations were foreign and frustrating. But as they searched for answers, the terms became *their* terms, the regulations and traditions became a natural part of the process. By the end of their search, the Odones had published scientific papers on ALD and had created their own professional associations.

The teachers and students who humble themselves will ponder and pray about what they are attempting to learn and to teach. They will seek guidance from others and from God. And as they seek such

guidance, they will be humbled by the answers they receive. Seldom do we view the teacher as a seeker of truth along with students, as one who is willing to submit in truth and submit to truth. Such a view, I am convinced, would cause teachers to teach differently and students to learn differently.

Fourth, *edification*. My wife’s mother is an expert in *edification*. When the children were young and visited their grandma, every visit required a thorough examination. She would say, “Open up your mouth so I can see if you’ve been good.” She then proclaimed her diagnosis: “Oh, I can tell you’ve been good. I can always tell.” No child ever questioned the need for grandma to look inside to see if they had been “good”; it seemed natural that their grandma would not be able to discern their goodness by examining their outward appearance. To see if they had been edified, she needed to look upon the heart.

We know we are experiencing edification when we are drawn closer to God, are more able to confront our challenges, are more at peace, and are less diverted by the tawdry and titillating things of the world. We recognize beauty and truth more readily and sense a greater need to serve those around us. As soon as Enos felt forgiveness, he desired to help his “brethren” (Enos 1:9). His heart was right, he was humble, he revered God, and he had the sensibility to know when God spoke peace to his heart. As healing came to his soul, he sensed the needs of those around him. And he wanted to help them. These are the results of edification.

Fifth, *inspiration*. When Adam was created, God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2:7). God’s air was the breath of life—spiritual air that fused with Adam’s body and made him a living soul. God literally *inspired* Adam, and at the very moment that God blew life into him, Adam inhaled

so that he could receive God's *inspiration* (see *inspire* in *The Oxford English Dictionary*). Without both actions—God's breath and Adam's inhalation—Adam could not live.

Teaching and learning both require inspiration. When a teacher draws a student closer to truth, the teacher breathes life into the student. And when the student acts on the truth, the student breathes life into the teacher. Both inspire and are inspired as they engage in the education of the heart. They recognize that the inspiration they receive from each other comes from God and that the truth that comes to them is as necessary to the life of their soul as God's breath was to Adam's soul.

My own inspiration as a teacher often comes from students. And this inspiration doesn't just occur in the classroom. I've often said that my favorite assignment is to give away scholarships to deserving students. One such student was a single mother with four children who received a scholarship from a local business leader. At a luncheon honoring the donor, this single mother said:

Because of this scholarship, I will graduate next month. June will be one of the happiest months of my life because I will start paying income tax for the first time in several years. Yes, I'm excited to pay tax again instead of receiving it in welfare payments. People think I'm crazy, but it's true.

Students like this one inspire me. They breathe life into my soul.

Sixth, *joy*. If I were to ask students to tell me the first word that comes to their mind when I mention the word *learning*, few would say "joy." As students and teachers we often take the joy out of learning. The joy of finding truth that Joseph experienced and the joy of discovery that the Odones experienced occur too rarely in our lives as teachers and learners.

Joy can come only after we have tasted the other fruits of the education of the heart—when our sense of discernment has been quickened, when we have gained a reverence for truth and for beauty, when we have learned humility, and when we have been edified and inspired. Joy is the ultimate, all-encompassing fruit of the education of the heart.

The Odones experienced joy as they found a cure for their son's vicious disease. Joseph also experienced joy as the heavens opened and he received his answer. Through him, a fourteen-year-old boy prophet, came truths that had been hidden from view for centuries—truths that can liberate us all from our own pain and suffering if we will open ourselves to their healing power. I know that the Restoration was real, that Joseph's question was answered, and that as we allow the truths of the Restoration to find a place in us, we will change the ways we teach and the ways we learn—not only in our church assignments, or in BYU classrooms, but in our own homes.

I pray that as learners and teachers we will recognize our questions of the heart as they emerge, that we will earnestly search as Joseph did, and that we will receive the guidance we need from the Lord and from others who love us. It is my prayer that we will each taste the fruits of such a search, that our sensibilities will increase, that our reverence for the Lord and his creations will deepen, that as we humble ourselves, we will receive inspiration and be edified. Then we will understand the unity of all truth and be filled with a joy that "passeth all understanding" (Philippians 4:7). The Lord's name will be written on our heart, "indelibly engraved, [so that] no prosperity or adversity shall ever move us from [his] love." I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.