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Gaining an Eternal Perspective: Making "Molehills" of Life's "Mountains"

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At times, mortality, with its challenges, trials and difficulties, seems to be more than we thought we had “signed up” for in our pre-mortal “enlistment ceremony.” Our earthly sojourn, with its problems and adversities, might be metaphorically compared to a long and arduous climb into the ravines and up the ridges on the slope of a very high mountain. When these “mountains” of life appear too high to surmount, perhaps the following principles, if properly applied, may be helpful in reducing them to more manageable “molehills.”

**PRINCIPLE NUMBER ONE: DEVELOP AN “ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE.”**

As we resolutely ascend the first ridge of our “mountain,” we may assume that our arrival at the top will bring an end to the struggle. Out of breath at the summit we experience a thrilling sense of accomplishment. We can look back down and realize the significance of our achievement. Momentarily, however, our reverie is disturbed as we discover that, rather than being complete, our journey is just beginning. Looming in the distance is another, higher peak. The excitement over our present achievement now fades in the face of this new challenge. Our determination to continue upward is only minimally decreased by the realization that between where we stand and the next ridge is a deep ravine which must be traversed. Gazing intently at the distant summit, we begin the descent into the rugged terrain below, reasoning to ourselves, “Sometimes the only way UP is DOWN!”

How differently our earthly troubles would appear if we could rise above the here and now and see them from an “eternal perspective.” If our pre-mortal spirit selves could look through a window into mortality and see our current struggles, how different from ours might their reactions be! If these former selves could then speak, what would they say to us? “Be patient. This trial will soon pass. You can make it! The challenge is very hard, but remember how much you did here to prepare for your chance in mortality!”

If we only knew what trials and difficulties we faced and overcame in the pre-mortal life (Battling the forces of Lucifer, for example), how much more confident and determined we might be now!

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1 This article was written from a lay perspective for use by the non-professional. It is anticipated that therapists may adapt it for use with their clients.

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**PRINCIPLE NUMBER TWO: DON’T BLAME GOD FOR ALL OF LIFE’S TRIALS**

We often attribute our misfortunes to our Heavenly Father, when, in reality, He does not deserve all the “credit.” There are at least four basic causes of our suffering:

1. **Some are the simple consequences of sin.** Just as blessings are “irrevocably decreed” for obedience (D&C 130:20, 21), so too, are the “wages of sin” unavoidable.

2. **Some are the results of “non-sin” free agency choices.** Building a house literally on a foundation of sand rather than rock (Matthew 7:24-27) would likely soon result in “adversity.” If we fail to maintain properly the automobile engine, we may one day find ourselves “suffering” through the expense of a major overhaul.

3. **Still other trials and tribulations come merely as part of living.** A rainstorm, for example, falls on both the just and the unjust. If, in that rain, my home is flooded along with others in my neighborhood, that is simply a portion of the experience of mortality, not necessarily an attempt by God to single me out for punishment.

4. **There are some experiences in mortality that are “given” by the Lord to school us.** In what must be considered one of the great “teaching moments” in earthly history, the Lord, apparently seeking to strengthen and instruct His prophet, deliberately tested Abraham in an agonizing manner, commanding that he offer up his only son Isaac as a sacrifice. (Genesis 22) (Adapted from Maxwell, 1979, pp. 29-31.)

As Elaine Cannon suggests, at one time we had a clear awareness that difficulties and trials would be a part of our mortal experience, and not necessarily an evidence of God’s punishment for wrongdoing. Despite our **prior** knowledge regarding the challenges of earth life, we exercised our agency to leave the relative peace and safety of Heavenly Father’s presence:

> It is our understanding that in the world before this one we all heard the plan of life presented by the gods. We had our agency-and each of us voted to come down to earth to be proven herewith. To me that means something like: ‘I will go down and I will take up life as the only Latter-day Saint in my family, or I’ll take up my life no matter what comes. I will go down and suffer a learning disability or watch the man I love marry someone else; or I will endure a frustrating relationship; or I’ll live my life working hard all my years without apparent success. But I will go down to earth to be proven and to learn.’ (Abraham 3:25)

One certainty of life is that each of us will meet some mighty test. This is part of the plan. Another thing that we can count on is that neither here nor hereafter are we suddenly going to emerge with qualities we haven’t developed or a pattern of living for which we have not prepared ourselves. (Cannon, 1982, p. 95)
PRINCIPLE NUMBER THREE: AVOID BEING CAUGHT UP IN TYPICAL PATTERNS OF MORMON “NON-THINK.”

Some of us, as members of the Church, have come to believe falsely that if we live righteously we will not experience any trials or suffering. Members in difficulty sometimes hear well-meaning, but grossly misguided statements such as, “If you read your scriptures every day, everything will be taken care of!”

The fallacy of such reasoning can easily be illustrated by the lives of such highly faithful individuals as Job, Joseph, the son of Jacob, Abraham, Paul the Apostle, and especially Jesus Christ, all of whom, despite exemplary living, suffered greatly.

All of us will have our own personal problems to deal with, as explained by Elder James E. Faust (1979):

Into every life there come the painful, despairing days of adversity and buffeting. There seems to be a full measure of anguish, sorrow, and often heartbreak for everyone, including those who earnestly seek to do right and be faithful (p. 53)

PRINCIPLE NUMBER FOUR: UNDERSTAND THE PLACE AND PURPOSE OF ADVERSITY.

There is in the eternal plan of God divine wisdom, which requires each of us to take our turn in the “refiner’s fire” of affliction. Elder Faust described the purposeful nature of this fire:

In the pain, the agony, and the heroic endeavors of life, we pass through a refiner’s fire, and the insignificant and the unimportant in our lives can melt away like dross and make our faith bright, intact, and strong. In this way the divine image can be mirrored from the soul. It is part of the purging toll exacted of some to become acquainted with God. In the agonies of life, we seem to listen better to the faint, godly whisperings of the Divine Shepherd.

The thorns that prick, that stick in the flesh, that hurt, often change lives which seem robbed of significance and hope. This change comes about through a refining process which often seems cruel and hard. In this way the soul can become like soft clay in the hands of the Master in building lives of faith, usefulness, beauty, and strength. For some, the refiner’s fire causes a loss of faith and belief in God, but those with eternal purposeful nature of this fire:

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The comforting words of the Lord to the Prophet Joseph Smith at the time of his duress in Liberty jail, “all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good,” (D&C 122:7) suggest that afflictions have significant value in the divine scheme. There is a purifying effect in adversity which both tempers the “metal” of our souls, and, paradoxically also softens us, increasing our patience, sensitivity, and kindness. As explained by Orson Hyde, “The spirit of rebellion could not be made to bow to mild and affectionate means; but it yielded under the hammer of adversity.” (1966, Vol. 6, p. 338)

If we are willing to be schooled by our trials, we may, like the Savior, come to be filled with compassion for the pains experienced by our fellows, and having suffered much ourselves, we can better attend to their needs:

And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind...

And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities. (Alma 7:11, 12)

Mortality was designed by a loving Father as a testing period--a furnace for the soul, which would separate the “gold and silver” from the “dross.” “And we will prove them, herewith,” (Abraham 3:25) indicates that one purpose of this probationary second estate is to find out what kind of “metal” we are composed of.

PRINCIPLE NUMBER FIVE: LEARN TO SEE PAST THE PAIN AND BEYOND THE SORROW.

It is difficult, in the midst of our suffering, to step “outside” ourselves, and catch a glimpse of how things may change with the dawning of a new day. When we can successfully accomplish this perceptual expansion, the pain of the moment may become somewhat more bearable.

One method of increasing our awareness beyond the now, is to look at the experience of our own lives. Each of us has already suffered through much difficulty, and our presence now indicates that we survived.

For many of us there is a tendency during and after a crisis to emphasize the negative effects of the trial while ignoring the positive outcomes. We would do well to make necessary effort to redirect our focus: What have our pains taught us? In which character attributes are we stronger? In how many ways are we better suited for the rigors ahead? How do our patience, compassion, and empathy compare with their pre-adversity levels? How much has our capacity to endure increased?

Most likely, if we have been able to “endure it well,” (D&C 121:8) the refining fire of adversity has purged us of at least some of the dross in our soul. We are closer to pure metal than before, and consequently our ability to endure the stresses ahead has increased as well. We will undoubtedly find that the challenges faithfully met in our past will be of significant value at some future testing point, when in fact, we may need the additional spiritual “muscle” thus developed to carry the burden ahead. Other, less weighty, trials will be all the easier to shoulder.

Even the devastation of a crippling injury can be looked beyond, as illustrated in the stirring words of a teenager who, after an accident left her paralyzed from the waist down, was able to say:

I'm so glad that I know what I do. Some people go all their lives searching and they never find the answers. I know. I'm sixteen, but I know, and I've got a beautiful life to live, if I will. Or I could be bitter—but then life would have no meaning.

No, I've got too much to get out of life, too much living to do. I can't quit because of a minor thing like being paralyzed. I owe it to God and myself to live life the best way I can, and I'm going to try. And trying is half the fight; and this is one battle I want to win!

Every night in my prayers I thank God for just being alive, and still having my hands and eyes and mind and heart and soul. The rest will come in time. Until then, I'm going to make the most I can out of life. I know how much it means now, and I'm going to make the most of it and not muffle up my second chance. This has
made grow up—really think for myself and realize how good life is. I'm glad this happened to me. I don't think I'd trade what I know and feel now, even for walking. No way! Besides, even if I never walk again, I have all eternity to run! (Name withheld, unpublished letter, 1972)

PRINCIPLE NUMBER SIX: RECOGNIZE YOUR PLACE IN THE "FELLOWSHIP OF HIS SUFFERING."

In any difficulty it is comforting to realize that we are not alone—that others share similar miseries, and that they, having faced and overcome their own painful challenges, can empathize with our situation. All around us are individuals who have or are now struggling with their problems. In history we can find case after case of mortals tested to their limits, as in the lives of such prophets as Job, Abraham, Joseph Smith, and Spencer W. Kimball.

If we focus on our own challenges, they seem to be magnified in dimensions, and may soon appear wholly beyond our capabilities. When we turn our focus outward, toward others, forgetting ourselves, and become compassionately concerned over their welfare, our own burdens will seem to gradually dwindle in magnitude.

By accepting our membership in the "fellowship of his suffering," (Philippians 3:10) we can fully appreciate the ultimate example given of endurance by Christ, who with reference to life's trials, "hath descended below them all." (D&C 122:8) The Savior, having shown us how to bear faithfully mortality's greatest burdens, beckons to us: "Come, follow me." (Luke 18:22) His shining example will even illuminate our troubled path: "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." (John 8:12)

PRINCIPLE NUMBER SEVEN: DECIDE TO HAVE A CUP "HALF-FULL."

We will seldom make better use of our God-given agency than in deciding to perceive our tribulations in something other than negative terms. Is the "cup" half-empty, or half-full? Our response will have a significant impact on our emotional reaction. That we all have a valid choice in answering this question is suggested by Obert C. Tanner (1955):

"It is a strange fact that there is no correlation, no one-to-one ratio, between the amount of satisfactions we gain in life and the amount of happiness we enjoy. All around us are cheerful and happy people with few of life's satisfactions and also unhappy people with many of life's satisfactions. (p. 219)

Elaine Cannon (1982) further explains the nature of our agency decision:

In adversity we can complain bitterly, "Why me? Why now?" and wallow in self-pity, thus denouncing God. Or we can find our way by asking that all-important question: "Which of my Heavenly Father's principles will help me now?" And when we find that appropriate principle, the next step is to live that law, "irrevocably decreed" upon which the particular blessing that we need is predicated (D&C 130:21). (p. 95)

One effective method of reframing our perception of the difficulties that beset us is to develop a healthy sense of humor. Whoever coined the phrase, "Laughter is the best medicine," may have experienced the curative effects of attempting to see the humorous side of even the most trying circumstances.

I suggest that even God may have been amused by the reported prayer of Moses when the children of Israel, following their prophet, were led between two mountain ranges to the shore of the Red Sea. With their "backs to the wall" they turned to discover that Pharaoh was now approaching with his soldiers and had blocked their only apparent way of escape. The Jewish historian, Josephus (1867, p. 63), tells us that in this desperate moment Moses turned in supplication to the Lord:

"Thou art not ignorant, O Lord, that it is beyond human strength and human contrivance to avoid the difficulties we are now under; but it must by thy work altogether to procure deliverance to this army, which has left Egypt at thy appointment. We despair of any other assistance or contrivance, and have recourse only to that home we have in thee; and if there be any method that can promise us an escape by thy providence, we look up to thee for it. And let it come quickly...

We may have little opportunity to determine for ourselves the number and severity of life's adversities, except, of course, those that follow the commission of sin. With an awareness of this reality, we are individually left with the opportunity to exercise our final freedom: "the ability to choose [our] attitude in a given set of circumstances." (Viktor Frankl, cited in Hillman, 1981, p. 165)

PRINCIPLE NUMBER EIGHT: USE YOUR "PROVED WEAPONS."

When young David, having heard the challenge of Goliath to the armies of Israel, suggested that someone should kill this "uncircumcised Philistine" for defying the armies of the living God, word got back to King Saul, who sent for the young man. Upon being favorably impressed with the faith of David, and being convinced that God might indeed assist this youngest son of Jesse with the Philistine giant as He had with the lion and the bear that threatened the young man's sheep, Saul put his own armor on the boy and gave him his own sword. Saul was a very large man (1 Samuel 9:1, 2), and his armor and sword probably engulfed young David, rendering him incapable of going to battle. At any rate, David removed the armor and returned it to the King saying, "I cannot go with these; for I have not proved them." (1 Samuel 17:39)

So, if he wasn't proved with the king's sword and armor, what was he prepared to use? His sling, of course. Hour after hour, day after day he had practiced with his sling as he watched over his father's sheep. Goliath fell to the "proved weapon." David went with his strength, and he won!

We too may each have a sufficient quantity of "proved weapons," if we will recognize and develop them, and if we are wise enough to use them.

PRINCIPLE NUMBER NINE: TELL A FRIEND.

There will be times, for each of us, when we need to unburden our souls with a trusted friend— one who will not quickly jump in with "quickie" solutions, but who will simply listen intently and be with us in our grief and difficulty. Often just talking about and expressing our
sorrows and frustrations will ease the pain they cause us.

While there are benefits in sharing our burdens with others, there is danger in indiscriminate repetition of these trials to “the whole neighborhood.” We may develop an unhealthy habit of bemoaning our problems in order to evoke an expected reassurance, or expression of pity from the listener. On the other hand, our companions may soon tire of our continual complaining and eventually turn a deaf ear.

Occasionally we will require more than a listening ear and understanding. At these times it is wise to seek the assistance of a quorum leader, auxiliary head, or bishop. In some cases we may find it necessary to seek the professional help of a competent therapist.

The Lord, knowing that we may all have need of help beyond ourselves, established His Church to provide a support group of individuals who are “willing to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light...and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort.” (Mosiah 18:8, 9) We are wise when we can recognize our need for assistance and accept the help that is available.

**PRINCIPLE NUMBER TEN: DEVELOP AN EFFECTIVE “HOLDFAST.”**

There is in the stagnant ponds and slow-moving streams near my boyhood home a species of very small multi-celled animals called the hydra. Its body consists of a hollow, tubular stalk, and a number of tentacles at one end. To move from place to place the hydra will simply “tumble” end-over-end, allowing the current to provide impetus. When a new living site is found, the hydra utilizes the same currents to bring smaller animals within reach of its “stinging cell” equipped tentacles which catch the organism and push it into the hydra’s “mouth.”

To keep from being “blown” about, the tiny hydra has, at its base, a “holdfast” structure, which enables it to adhere to the bottom of the pond or stream. In its natural habitat the hydra can be seen securely waving in the shifting currents.

This situation in nature strikes me as parallel to the position we have in the gospel, as we struggle to remain “steadfast and immovable” (Mosiah 5:15) in the face of strong and often unfriendly “currents.” The prophet Helaman, sensing the tide of difficulties, challenges, and trials in which he and his sons were required to travel, gave the following wise counsel:

> And now, my sons, remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation, that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down... (Helaman 5:12)

By forming our personal foundation on the “rock of Christ,” on the gospel, and by resolving any personal sins through the process of repentance, we are in a position to “bind” the Lord to help us in our moments of grief when our own resources are not sufficient, and we need the added strength of his grace. He will not rescue us from our growth-causing challenges, but He will stand by us providing encouragement and an extra shoulder to lean on. “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)

Sincere and fervent prayer seems to be an essential element in this process of securing divine assistance with our mortal miseries, as it was for the people of Alma:

> And it came to pass that so great were their afflictions that they began to cry mightily to God.

> And it came to pass that the voice of the Lord came to them in their afflictions, saying: Lift up your head and be of good comfort, for I know of the covenant which ye have made unto me; and I will covenant with my people and deliver them out of bondage.

> And I will also ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs....

> And now it came to pass that the burdens which were laid upon Alma and his brethren were made light; yea the Lord did strengthen them that they could bear up their burdens with ease, and they did submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord. (Mosiah 24:10, 13-15)

The promise of the Lord is not that the way will always be easy, but that it will be endurable, with His help:

> What God Hath Promised

God hath not promised skies always blue,
Flower strewn pathways all our lives thro’,
God hath not promised sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.
God hath not promised we shall not bear
Many a burden, many a care.
He hath not promised we shall not know
Toll and temptation, trouble and woe.
But God hath promised strength for the day,
Rest for the Labourer, light for the way,
Grace for the trials, help from above,
Unfailing sympathy, undying love.

(Anonymous)

**PRINCIPLE NUMBER ELEVEN: REMEMBER WHO’S “IN CHARGE.”**

We sometimes forget that God is in His heavens, that He is completely aware of all that has occurred, all that is occurring, and all that will occur on the earth, and that He is also very aware of our individual plights.

As a young married father, having suffered with a debilitating illness for several months, and seemingly headed for even greater health problems, I found myself overcome with self-pity, and in a moment of solitude I cried out my angry frustrations to the Lord: “Dear God! This is not the way I wanted my life to go!” This outburst, punctuated by several moments of anguished sobbing, was interrupted by an unexpected answer to my “prayer”: “That is the problem, my son! You are not in charge—I am! Trust me!”

By deciding to let God be “in charge” we should not assume that we must then abandon our own agency choices in how our lives will go. One of the most significant purposes of our mortal probation is to provide each of us the opportunity to assume increasing responsibility for ourselves and our destinies. We are...
not intended to become sophisticated humanoid robots, programmed by God to do His bidding, without individual volition. However, while some of us might wish to proclaim, "I am the Captain of my soul," we would, by so doing, fail to comprehend, as Elder Maxwell states, that "'corporal of my soul' would be at least somewhat closer to the truth." (1979, p. 25)

We may seek to take over, usually in ignorance, and try to assume total control of our own destiny, when we would be better off to relinquish at least partial control to an infinitely wiser Father, who knows just what we need, and how much of it, for our optimum growth. We can benefit greatly by following the wise counsel of Solomon: "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." (Proverbs 3:5, 6)

Nothing will come into our lives, except it can become a growth experience, and often, even a blessing. Even our sins, when properly repented of, and learned from, can be useful as a stimulus for improvement and avoidance of further transgression: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God;" (Romans 8:28) and, "all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good." (D&C 122:7)

Adversity loses much of its horror if we know God is real, in charge, that he loves us, and if we trust him!

SUMMARY THOUGHTS

As we are able to develop our "eternal perspective" we gradually see more and more of the value and purpose in the tribulations we experience:

Referring to the imprisonment and other terrible injustices suffered by Joseph Smith, President Brigham Young said that the Prophet progressed toward perfection more in thirty-eight...
years because of the severe tribulation through which he successfully passed than he would have been able to do in a thousand years without it. (Church Education System, 1981, p. 296)

If we now return to the metaphor comparing our journey through mortality to the long and difficult climb up a mountain with successive ravines and peaks, we can discover significant meaning in the words of Elder Bruce R. McConkie (1980): “As we view the endless course ahead, the glory and wonder on each succeeding peak seems to swallow up the shadows and sorrows of the valleys below.” (p. 73)

We can reduce our “mountains” into “molehills” by comprehending the part these mountains play in our eventual happiness:

**Could I be Truly Happy?**

Could I be truly happy
If all my problems went away?
If I never had to worry,
And I didn’t need to pray?
Could I be truly happy
If everything turned out right?
If all men loved everyone
And there never was a fight?
Could I be truly happy
If I slept the whole day long?
If I never did do anything,
And nothing ever went wrong?
No, I could never be truly happy
If I never had to choose;
If I never had to struggle,
And I never had to lose.
If I would be truly happy,
The only way for me
Is to have the trials needed
To set my spirit free.
(Dori Witbeck, unpublished work, 1981, used by permission.)

In conclusion, we can gain inspiration from the life and example of President Spencer W. Kimball, who has faithfully endured more than his “share” (it would seem) of life’s problems. Despite the number and severity of his trials, he does not dwell on the past, but with a view to the future, he is able to say:

There are great challenges ahead of us, giant opportunities to be met. I welcome that exciting prospect and feel to say to the Lord, humbly, “Give me this mountain. Give me these challenges.”
(Kimball, 1979, p. 79)

**REFERENCES**

Kimball, Spencer W. “Give me this mountain.” Ensign, November 1979, pp. 78-79.