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A Tribute to Gospel Teachers

Rebecca McConkie

Rebecca McConkie is a middle-school teacher in Harlem, New York.

My ambitious father tried to teach us ancient Greek the summer I turned seven. Every morning we complained our way down to the kitchen table, with a piece of butcher paper stretched across its length, and delved into a language that, as one of my older siblings never failed to remind him, was dead. Only now does it occur to me that my dad didn't know Greek at the time. He was going to learn it with us. On those early summer mornings while my mother prepared breakfast and most of us fell back asleep, my dad let us watch him learn. And although I cannot now recall what Greek letter follows alpha, I tremble with excitement when I think about how much we learned that summer.

The outcome of those experiences is a lesson I have tried to apply in my first year as a middle-school teacher. I teach in what the politically correct call a low-income area and what the culturally insensitive call the ghetto. My students are generally four years behind average, and despite my best efforts to change their worlds, every day at three o'clock they must go home to the same situation they left that morning. I ask myself if they are processing anything—some particle of a day's lessons.

The evidence is discouraging. All sixty of my students still say, "The book is mines." Jerry still can't write a complete sentence. And even though this is Aslim's second time in the seventh grade, he can't finish an easy-reader book about Dick and Jane and Spot. In an especially frustrating time this past year, a more experienced teacher reminded me that far more than teaching literacy, I was teaching these students

how to learn. In retrospect, that is what every great gospel teacher has taught me: how to learn.

In that respect, my father is my favorite example. It seems like there were always opportunities to hear him teach. Of course there were church meetings, firesides, and family hour. But there were also dinner-table conversations, rides in the car, letters, and phone calls home the night before I had to teach Sunday School. But I saw him learning far more than I saw him teaching—and that seems important.

I don't remember exactly what he taught us in family scripture study, but I know what the margins of his scriptures look like, and his copy of *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* is likewise sufficiently worn. I can picture him lying on his back with a highlighter in his mouth and a book on his chest. I hear him asking questions in casual conversation. "Dennis, you're a doctor. How much has the human body decomposed three days after death?"

I am unapologetically biased when I think of my father as my great gospel teacher. Although twenty years down the road I have forgotten the specific things he spent time teaching me, I will always know how to learn the gospel because I saw my father doing it. He demonstrated that, like Peter with the lame man, effective gospel teachers take students and command them, "Rise up and walk" (Acts 3:6).

Such was the case on the first day in my Pearl of Great Price class. The teacher was methodically giving us an overview of the book's contents. Chapter by chapter, theme by theme, he took fifteen minutes to show that those sixty pages of scripture covered the entire history of the earth. On finishing the summary, he triumphantly promised that in his class, we would be as "Moses upon the High Mount, with a panoramic view of the earth and its purposes."

Here I was on the heels of a man who was willing to share the benefits of his preparation and take me up the mountain. "This isn't a class you can take at Berkeley," he stated. "You can't get this class at *Haarvard*" (he emphasized the word with an accent that crossed South Boston street life and intellectual piety). "You can get this class only in the *school of the prophets*." True to his word, it was unlike any class I had ever taken. With only the scriptures for a text, we began in the premortal councils, and by the final exam we were discussing the Second Coming.

I frequently left his class thinking, "I've got to go home and reread that." Simply put, we saw that he had climbed the heights because he had put in the effort; and by repeatedly pointing us to the scriptures, he invited us to do the same. The outcome makes me think of the

lame man: “His feet and ankle bones received strength. And he leaping up stood, and walked” (Acts 3:7–8). This teacher covered all the important points of the syllabus, but his class was valuable because he effectively showed us how to truly ascend in gospel understanding.

When I interviewed for my first teaching job, I told the principal that good teachers shape systems capable of working without them. I still believe that. My uncle says of my grandfather, “Dad taught us how to get answers for ourselves instead of having us develop a dependency relationship on him. Had he done that, the well of our understanding would have dried up when he passed away. Perhaps the most important thing he taught us was how to keep the waters of everlasting life continuously flowing into that well.”¹

I am grateful for the many teachers who have demonstrated that the goal of gospel teaching is to enable all men and women to have prophetic insights—not merely to lead us up the mountain so we can see the things that Moses saw but to show us how to walk up the mountain so we ourselves can see, understand, and apply the outcomes. **RE**

Note

1. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *The Bruce R. McConkie Story: Reflections of a Son* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 251.