



4-1-2001

### How to Be Anxiously Engaged Without Being Anxious

Lili De Hoyos Anderson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Anderson, Lili De Hoyos (2001) "How to Be Anxiously Engaged Without Being Anxious," *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*. Vol. 26 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol26/iss1/6>

This Article or Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

PRESENTED AT THE SPRING 2001 AMCAP CONVENTION - 30 MARCH 2001

## How to Be Anxiously Engaged Without Being Anxious

LILI DE HOYOS ANDERSON, LCSW, PhD

*Brigham Young University*

*Gospel principles suggest a three-realm conceptual model to understand and address life stresses. Telestial, terrestrial, and celestial kinds of stress are identified, with responses offered to each level of stress. Particular attention is called to the tendency of church members to get trapped in terrestrial stress.*

The scriptures address three distinct kinds of stress corresponding to the three kingdoms of glory. Each of the kingdoms is characterized by varying levels of light, intelligence, truth, and law (see D&C 88:22-32). Stress can be usefully categorized according to these same parameters (De Hoyos, 1986). Such categorization brings greater insight and more effective application of principles which correctly target the problem and offer real solutions.

### **TELESTIAL STRESS - "THE SOAP OPERA SYNDROME"**

Some might think that all stress should be considered *telestial*, because it is pretty unpleasant, but in fact there are also such things as *terrestrial* stress and *celestial* stress (which will be discussed later).

Telestial stress could well be nicknamed the *Soap Opera Syndrome* (Anderson, 1994), named from an incident that happened in my life many years ago:

We had moved from Utah just in time for my husband to start a Masters in Social Work program at the University of Oklahoma. I was nine months pregnant and probably should not have gone anywhere, but I did not want to stay in Utah and have the baby alone. This

was a difficult time; there already were two preschoolers at home, and the baby was two weeks overdue. My husband would call home several times daily to see if I had gone into labor. Of course, he did not want to remind me that the baby was overdue, so he would just call and ask, "How's it going?" and I would reply, "You want to know how it is going? Listen!" – then I would hold the phone out because usually someone in the house was screaming (and much of the time it was me). After the baby was finally born, I was so exhausted; I would sit on the couch for long periods of time with the baby, not wanting to move. I would feed the baby, hold the baby, then send one of the older kids for a diaper so I could change the baby. After a while, I started watching TV. There were only game shows or soap operas. I got tired of the game shows so one day I watched a soap opera, then I watched two, then I watched three in a row – for about four or five months. One day my four-year-old said, "Mom, why is that man yelling at that

*Lili De Hoyos Anderson LCSW PhD is a clinical social worker in private practice in Draper Utah, and adjunct faculty at Brigham Young University, School of Family Life. An earlier version of this presentation was published in the February 1994 Ensign. Correspondence should be addressed to Lili De Hoyos Anderson PhD, e-mail <lilianders@aol.com>*

lady?" Now I had promised years before to never dismiss or avoid a child's question, but how could I give a real answer without going into the sordid details of the last three weeks' episodes leading up to this particular fight? I thought for a moment then said, "OK, Adam, this is the answer: these people are making really bad choices; they're not living the way Heavenly Father wants us to live; they're breaking all kinds of commandments - and it makes them miserable." Adam looked up at me and, with that child's instinct, he asked, "Then why are we watching it?" Ouch! So we turned off the TV and have never watched another soap opera since. (see Anderson, 1994, p. 47)

All these years later now, thinking about telestial stress, my answer to Adam still is a pretty good definition of telestial stress: living in ways that are contrary to the commandments of God and then paying the price for it - or as the scriptures warn, "sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind" (Hosea 8:7, Mosiah 7:30).

The commandments are not arbitrary hoops God asks us to jump through in order to win a prize. They are advance information about which behaviors bring happiness and which bring sorrow. As Alma so succinctly put it, "wickedness never was happiness" (Alma 41:1). There is a great deal of stress in life that comes as a result of sin.

Several years ago, a rather gruesome cover story in *Newsweek* magazine (Adler & McCormick, 1994) called "A Week in the Death of America" reported how many people had been killed in this country in one week. In many cases, pictures of the victims were included, with their names, ages, and brief synopses of how they died. After reading every case, I was surprised to find myself feeling somewhat comforted. This was because, in almost every case, the victims were living telestial lifestyles - and I do not live like that. Many of them were involved in committing crime or in some kind of drug deal; some were involved in love triangles which exploded in violence. These were ugly situations, the kind we are generally protected from if we obey basic commandments. Certainly, if we are active members of the Church and are worthy of a temple recommend, we will be largely free of such telestial stress. Of course, the article reported a few innocent victims; however, such innocent victims were clearly the exception: one person happened to have been in a video store that was robbed,

and he became caught in the violence that ensued. This demonstrates how the telestial realm can indeed encroach on terrestrial or celestial lives. But overall, our lives are much better when we do not sin, and therefore are much safer from telestial stress.

Most of us do not need to be persuaded of the dangers of telestial living, but many children and adolescents may still need to be convinced. Counselors who work directly with the youth need to successfully communicate this message. Young people are bombarded with constant advertisements for telestial living. In light of such enticements, many begin to feel that God is trying to ruin their fun - getting in the way of their going to desirable movies, or attending parties, or wearing the popular kind of clothes. These young people seem to entirely miss the connection between sin and sorrow. But the *Great Plan of Happiness*, contained in the scriptures (see Alma 42:8), is the best teaching tool.

In Alma 36, Alma speaks to his son, Helaman, as he transfers the stewardship of the sacred record to him. Alma explains how he came to know the truth of these things for himself. He recounts the familiar story of his rebellious youth and of the angel who shook the earth with a loud voice, telling Alma "[even] if thou wilt of thyself be destroyed, seek no more to destroy the church of God" (Alma 36:9). Alma fell into some sort of coma for three days and three nights. At this point in the story, Alma tells Helaman something quite interesting; he says,

... the angel spake more things unto me which were heard of my brethren, but I did not hear them. For when I heard the words - If thou wilt of thyself be destroyed, seek no more to destroy the Church of God - I was struck with such great fear and amazement lest perhaps I should be destroyed ... (Alma 36:11)

This is amazing. Obviously, Alma would have heard this concept before - from his father, his Sunday School teachers, Young Men's leaders, or whoever - but apparently it never really got through to him. And although the angel went on to deliver other words that undoubtedly continued to shake the earth, Alma did not hear them - because he was still reeling from the shock that he would have to pay a price for the choices he was making. This stunned him to the point that it permanently changed his life.

Perhaps Alma, like some of today's young people, had

never really understood agency. Elder Boyd K. Packer (Packer, 1992, p. 67) carefully does not mention the term “free agency,” but instead refers to “agency” or “moral agency” – emphasizing that agency is not precisely “free.” Too often, individuals may have the mistaken idea that agency is *free* – meaning they can do whatever they want *and get away with it* (this is one of Satan’s great lies!). However, the fact is that agency actually means: we can go to hell if we really insist. Indeed, we may try to argue our right to do something contrary to the commandments by protesting, “but I have free agency!” However, what this really means is, “yes, I can destroy myself if I choose, and God won’t stop me because he allows me that choice.” *The Great Plan of Happiness* should be regularly reviewed and taught – so young people can come to understand, like Alma, the consequences of their choices.

Another aspect of God’s Plan that may help to avoid telestial stress is understanding that the consequences of sin are often deferred. Sometimes this may confuse young people as they see people getting away even with murder and all sorts of other sins as well. Expecting an immediate consequence, however, is a lack of understanding of the Plan. Consider for a moment what would happen if every time we did something wrong a lightning bolt came from heaven and zapped us just enough to hurt, and if every time we did something good, an immediate reward appeared – maybe a hundred dollar bill. Given such circumstances, how would we behave? On our worst day, it wouldn’t take long to figure out the system, but all it would prove is that we can indeed keep our hands off an electrified fence. It would not in any way demonstrate virtue or help us to become more Christlike. It would be a kind of “cattle prod” salvation.

But virtue is acquired as we make correct choices without an immediate reward, and maybe even with a cost to the correct choice. Christ taught, “For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same?” (Matthew 5:46). It is when we love those that hate us that we come closer to developing a Christlike love. Alma 12:12 teaches that a space is needed between action and consequence, between sin and punishment or between virtue and reward in order to allow for the true exercise of agency. Young people (and older ones, too) need to know that while there is a space between action and consequence, positive or negative, the day of judgment (meaning, *accountability*) will indeed come.

The solution to telestial stress is simply to repent and obey: if we obey the commandments of God and repent of our sins, we do not have to be subject to telestial stress.

### TERRESTRIAL STRESS: “THE MARTHA SYNDROME”

The *Martha Syndrome* refers to that Martha who is depicted in the painting which hangs in Relief Society meeting rooms all over the world. This painting shows Martha and her sister, Mary, with Christ as they fed him in their home one evening. Mary and Martha were the sisters of Lazarus and this good family had a lot of significant interaction with Christ. The last four verses of Luke chapter 10 tell of Martha complaining to the Savior because her sister isn’t helping in the kitchen. The Savior responds with words we have often heard, “Mary has chosen the better part, and it shall not be taken from her” (Luke 10:42). Just before those words, however, are other important words which, I think, define terrestrial stress: “Martha, Martha: thou art careful and troubled over many things” (Luke 10:41). Note that Martha was “careful and troubled” over many terrestrial things – at that moment, it was preparing a meal. Many things that we are troubled over fall into this terrestrial category. These are not evil things; evil could be identified and eliminated more easily. It is much more difficult at the terrestrial level because the focus of attention is on good things, but things which are nevertheless *of the world*.

LDS women, in particular, seem to have problems with the *Martha Syndrome*. We have much care and trouble over cub scouts, the PTA, homemaking meetings, cooking, cleaning and the like. Moms worry about their children’s homework, and the science fair, and getting children to soccer practice, and music lessons, and then keeping all the baby books and scrapbooks up to date. There are church callings to magnify and a garden to grow, and fresh produce to can, and food storage to be obtained and rotated – and, oh yes, we’re really not cooking with enough whole wheat! And are we actively supporting the political candidate of our choice? And are our homes like the temple? And are we getting enough exercise? This list could quite literally consume many pages. Every time we turn around – or hear a speech in church or another Relief Society lesson – there is another thing we can add to the list.

I remember as a young mother developing such a list.

I remember lessons on cooking with whole wheat. So I'd go home and try to get my kids to eat it (now that is an interesting challenge!). Another day, another lesson mentioned it is really not enough to eat whole wheat, we need greens, too, while living off food storage. So they taught us how to sprout the wheat and use those sprouts in several different ways. I even tried that (which was another interesting challenge, by the way!).

Once there was a lesson explaining that if our family exchanged a lot of colds and flu, it was probably because we did not disinfect our doorknobs regularly. So, for a while, I strapped a can of Lysol to my belt and disinfected every doorknob in sight.

Some lessons remind us that we were losing out on our LDS pioneer heritage by not quilting more. I do not descend from pioneer ancestors, so none of those skills have been passed down through my family. But I figured to be a good Mormon wife I had better learn how to quilt and bake bread and rolls, and make great pies and can fruit. These are all good things, but being too "careful and troubled" about them can trap us in the *Martha Syndrome*. Remember that *Patty Perfect* story that used to circulate in the eighties?

Patty Perfect would get up at five o'clock every day and zip her slim, vigorous body into a stylish sweatsuit. [I read that far and already hated this woman!] Then she would run five miles – eight miles on Saturday – wake each one of her twelve children with a smile and a kiss, and plan a good day. Soon classical music is wafting through Patty's home as the kids practice their instruments while she whips up a nourishing breakfast of whole wheat waffles and reconstituted dry milk (which of course her family just loves).

Patty's story continues in this nauseating fashion while she continues to do everything perfect, adding all of those Relief Society lessons into one wonderful day. All the baby books are up to date, she is making whole wheat bread, fellowshipping the neighbor into the church, doing her visiting teaching, writing up geneological inquiries and supporting the ward missionaries! It was just one thing after another – and at the end of the day she and Paul Perfect go and do eight sessions in the temple. So then she is feeling really satisfied, but not quite challenged enough, so she volunteers to head up the family reunion, because it will help her boredom a little bit.

When we would hear the *Patty Perfect* story, my husband used to turn to me and say, "You know, Lili, I don't think you get it." "Of course I get it," I would protest, and he would insist, "No, I don't think you are getting it." So finally I asked, "Okay, what am I not getting?" He answered, "You still think you can be *Patty Perfect*." I said, "Well, yes, this year I am getting really close." And one year I did get close, really close: I even made matching Halloween costumes – theme costumes – all my kids were dressed as the signers of the Declaration of Independence and their wives (we have pictures; I can prove this). And they even knew who they were. We went to the library and read all about the signers. It was great.

These were very satisfying things. I am certainly not for a moment suggesting we should not do these good things. That is why terrestrial stress is so tricky – because these are not things that should be eliminated. The Savior was not telling Martha she should never cook or clean the kitchen again. He was warning her that she could get caught in the terrestrial realm, focusing so much on good things of the world to the exclusion of more important things – as Elder Paul H. Dunn has said, "getting caught up in the thick of thin things" (Dunn, 1979, p. 8).

Of course, men can get trapped in terrestrial stress too. Employment can certainly be a terrestrial concern, and of course husbands and fathers need to attend to financial support of the family. However, work can draw too much of their focus. Along with employment, there are dozens of other terrestrial concerns that call for attention: house maintenance and repair, a garden, landscaping and yardwork, keeping the cars running, and whatever other responsibilities you assume. In addition, church leadership meetings can be overdone and become way out of balance.

Terrestrial stress isn't just about women, but admittedly women have seemed to turn it into an art form. One day my husband had a great insight; he said, "I know why men preside in the church. It is because if the women were in charge, the entire church would be obsessive compulsive." He is on to something: it is rare to attend a women's meeting without a tablecloth, a centerpiece, and a magnet or a laminated bookmark gift for everyone to take home. Again, there is nothing wrong with doing nice things, but it can get out of balance. I have spoken at many Stake Women's Conferences where

a woman would come see me during the luncheon and tell me she wished she had been able to attend my presentation but because she was on the food committee she has been busy putting the garnish on the dessert. It is amazing that pictures of Mary and Martha have been in the Relief Society rooms for so many years, and we still do not get it!

Another woman came to me after hearing these ideas and said, "I thought when you said the *Martha Syndrome* you meant Martha Stewart." Well, if that helps deliver the message, that's OK too. It is the same mentality we're talking about – where everything has to be more elaborate, better than last year, better than last time; we've got to do more and be more and be all things to all people whether we're men or women, trying to meet every single person's needs. I knew a brother in the Stake Presidency in Oklahoma years ago who told me how his time had been taken up by members of his stake who wanted to talk to him about problems. This man wanted to help but he had a wife and eight children who were not getting a balanced part of his time and attention. So he talked to his family and they made a schedule of when he could meet with stake members. Many of those hours were during the day because he had some flex time at the college institute where he taught. People would call and say, "I'd like to see you" and he'd say, "Okay, I've got this time on Thursday," but they wouldn't want to take time off work. So, this brother would ask, "What do you do when you've got a toothache?" They would answer that they had to take off time to see a dentist. Then he would reply, "Well, when it hurts as much as a toothache, give me a call." He had been too "careful and troubled" about everybody else's concern, slipping into that Martha complex, of trying to be all things to everybody, all the time. The answer to terrestrial stress is to simplify, to not "run faster than you have strength" (Mosiah 4:27).

Occasionally, there are complaints that activity in the church is too costly, too demanding, and too consuming. But consider the warning found in section 58 of the Doctrine and Covenants: "I command, and men obey not; I revoke and they receive not the blessing" (D&C 58:32). Then after disobedience, they conclude "this is not the work of the Lord, for his promises are not fulfilled" (D&C 58:33).

There are at least two significant program changes the Church has made to help us simplify – and in many

ways we have circumvented both. One change was the consolidated schedule, which was designed to provide more family time during the week and on Sunday so we could focus on being good Christians at home and in the community. But, as Elder Boyd K. Packer (1990) put it, "nothing likes a vacuum" – and neither, apparently, do members of the church:

There will be ... fewer activities, fewer programs. That will leave a vacuum. Nothing likes a vacuum. We must resist, absolutely resist, the temptation to program that vacuum. That space belongs to families. When we cut down on Sundays to the block plan that consolidated our meetings and left some time open, you know what happened. Now brethren, it is their time. Let them use it as they feel to do – for better or for worse ... If we do, then that vacuum will be filled with prayer and work and study ... with faith and reverence. (Packer, 1990)

As soon as more time became available, we added more programs, more meetings, more interviews – often "enhancing" existing programs (Relief Society, Young Men's and Young Women's, Primary, choir, church athletics, girls camp, and so on) up to the next level of complexity – basically undoing the good that could be done by the consolidated schedule. Church leaders try to remind us and encourage us: in February of 1999, a letter from the First Presidency was read in Sacrament meetings which admonished us to eliminate all but the essential meetings on Sundays. Some wards may have made changes, but many did not.

A second significant change that the church instituted was revising the budget program. At the time many speeches were given explaining that this change was not just to alleviate the financial pressures on the members, but to alleviate the time demands. A reduction in time demands was partly accomplished through limiting the amount of money allocated to various programs – when we run out of money, we have to simplify the program, right? But this did not happen: because we are a pretty prosperous people now (at least collectively, if not individually), some generous but misguided people reach into their own pockets and say, "here, I can pay for that." Others ask the kids to bring materials, money, or refreshments for activities – thereby imposing a cost to the activity. But doing this traps us at the terrestrial level.

Unfortunately, excessive demands have caused some

to experience burn-out in church service (perhaps not surprising when we consider what we have done with programs like Girls' Camp). How tragic that some may blame the programs of the Lord's church (see D&C 58:33) instead of recognizing that the problem is a failure to obey.

But sometimes it is done right. For instance, at stake auxiliary training meeting not long ago, the brethren were in charge of the refreshments. After the closing prayer they invited us into the cultural hall where two men were setting up a table. There was no tablecloth, no decorations, no "theme." In the kitchen another brother was getting some brown cardboard boxes out of the freezer. A couple of guys brought those to the banquet table, ripped them open, put them on the table, and invited us to help ourselves to ice cream sandwiches. One fellow got one of those large garbage cans, set it right next to the table and said, "you can put your trash in here," and a very thoughtful brother got some of those coarse, brown paper towels from the restroom, set them on the table and said, "here – if you need a napkin." It was not elegant, but there was a treat for those who wanted one, and no one missed any part of the spiritually instructive and uplifting program because they had been "busy putting the garnish on the dessert." We could take lessons from some of the brethren on that!

At the age of twenty-two I was called to be Primary President. Our new presidency began to meet regularly and after a few weeks my husband asked how our meetings were going. I said, "Great! These are wonderful women!"

He asked, "How long are your meetings?"

I said, "Oh, two and a half or three hours sometimes."

He said, "Ouch!"

So I said, "OK, teach me."

My husband quoted Elder J. Golden Kimball, that great and wise man, who once said "it has to be a damn good meeting to be better than no meeting at all" (Richards, 1966). Then he went on to teach me some great skills, including the making of an effective agenda and distributing that agenda a couple of days early so each person could be ready with assignments. He said, "Whatever you do, have your opening prayer on time and have your closing prayer sixty minutes later. If you can't do it in sixty minutes, it most likely doesn't need to be done that week." He was right. I became a more effective leader

and reduced the burden on those sisters. I felt their gratitude and I felt gratitude, too. It became clear to me that our meetings had taken up too much of their time.

Families, too, may occasionally pay a high a price for our callings. A counselor in a Young Women's presidency told me of a time when they planned special refreshments for *New Beginnings*. Eight women came to the president's house and spent about eight hours making patchwork sugar cookies from cookie dough, which they dyed in the seven *value colors*. Now do you think the girls ate those cookies any more spiritually (or even slower) than they would have eaten an Oreo? The many hours spent on those cookies could have been used for visiting, or reading the scriptures, or spending time with their own preschoolers – or even taking a nap.

One barrier to simplifying may be tradition. We tend to repeat rather elaborate activities because that is the way it always has been done. We justify ignoring the counsel to simplify by thinking of some of the good outcomes of previous years' programs – for instance, a less active youth who felt the spirit, or bore her testimony, or started coming to church (note that such good outcomes have nothing to do with the colors of the cookies). But it is so easy to forget the fact that God has always made lemonade out of lemons. Any positive outcome is usually not *because* we are ignoring guidelines, but *in spite* of it. It is true that God will bless any who are ready to feel the spirit, but just think what an outpouring of the spirit could happen if we would increase our obedience and simplify as our leaders have pled with us to do.

Elder Boyd K. Packer said on one occasion that the brethren sometimes feel they are "losing the ability to correct the course of the church" (Packer, 1990). They receive revelation and teach the will of the Lord and then, with the best intentions in the world, we trample all over it. Again, as the Lord has warned: "I command, and men obey not. I revoke and they receive not the blessing" (D&C 58:32).

### CELESTIAL STRESS: "THE WILDERNESS SYNDROME"

Although celestial stress may seem a contradiction in terms, there is a need in the Plan of Happiness for a *wilderness experience*. In the scriptures are many examples of individuals and groups that were called into the wilderness before being led to the Promised Land:

Moses and the Israelites, Lehi and his family, the Jaredites, even our latter-day pioneers.

God calls each of us to enter a *spiritual wilderness* to prepare for the kingdom: “Come out from among them and be ye separate” (2 Cor. 6:17). “Go ye out from ... Babylon” (D&C 133:14). “Friendship of the world is enmity with God” (James 4:4). We need to spiritually leave the world and shed our worldly baggage in order to be prepared for his spirit and his kingdom and his promised land forever. This preparatory, refining stress awaits us in the spiritual wilderness.

The wilderness experience of celestial stress can include many different refining experiences and trials. In studying the lives of those who have successfully traversed the wilderness, however, two consistent outcomes seem to be a part of that experience: first, taking upon oneself the standard of Christ; and second, coming to know the Savior.

#### THE STANDARD OF CHRIST

Second Nephi, chapter 4, from verse 17 to the end of the chapter, has been referred to as *the psalm of Nephi*. It begins with these beautiful but painful words:

O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities. I am encompassed about because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me. And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins ... (2 Ne. 4:17-19)

These words may, at first, sound like the pain of a sinful man, but this is certainly not the case with Nephi, particularly at this point in his life. What failing, then, is Nephi so concerned about? Nephi names the problem he is wrestling with in verse 27:

Why should I yield to sin because of my flesh? Yea, why should I give way to my temptation that the evil one have place in my heart to destroy my peace and afflict my soul? [And then, here it is – Nephi’s problem:] Why am I angry because of *mine enemy*?” (2 Ne. 4:27).

Now, who were Nephi’s enemies? Laman and Lemuel, his brothers. Why would Nephi be angry with them? Because they kept trying to kill him. Many people, perhaps even most, judging by the standard of the world,

might say Nephi was over-reacting; he was not a sinful man. Certainly, compared to the world, Nephi was indeed a front runner. Nephi, however, was not measuring his behavior by the standards of the world; his standard was Christ. Nephi saw where he was lacking in his efforts to become like the Savior and this gave him stress, *celestial stress*, because he wanted to close the gap. To truly acquire Christ’s image in our countenance (see Alma 5:14), to be like him when he appears (see Moroni 7:48), requires a monumental and committed effort – *all* that we can do, in addition to the grace of Christ (see 2 Ne. 25:23). This effort may sometimes cause our souls to groan with the realization of our weaknesses. Nevertheless, this is the business of life – this is the purpose of the Great Plan of Happiness, to allow us to willingly enter the spiritual wilderness and to experience those spiritual growing pains.

A question which characterizes this effort to become Christlike is, “What lack I yet?” (Matt. 19:20) To become like the Savior, we have to focus on a celestial star and stop worrying about being measured by the world. We have to leave all worldly baggage along the way, determinedly breaking the chains that bind us to Babylon. This is entirely an individual journey. No one can push or pull us along this path. We must choose it.

#### COMING TO KNOW JESUS CHRIST

Think of the prophet Joseph Smith in the spiritual wilderness of Liberty Jail: “O God, where art thou?” (D&C 121:1). He cries out, doubtless wondering how long he will be in this terrible wilderness, suffering the stress which sanctifies, purifies and refines. God answers Joseph:

My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment [I love God’s references to time – Joseph was four and a half months in Liberty Jail, but relative to eternity, it was indeed “but a small moment”]; and then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes. (D&C 121:7-8)

And then God speaks these words: “Thou art not yet as Job” (D&C 121:10). I can almost hear the prophet Joseph asking, “Did I say I wanted to be? Is my name on a list somewhere?” Well yes, his name was on a list – and our names are on that same list. We all signed up for the

whole course in the pre-earth life, and again when we were baptized. We wanted to become more like our Heavenly Father, and the only way to do so is to follow the Savior into a spiritual wilderness, where we will find him. Brothers and sisters, it is a demanding course! Further, a real challenge for many of us is that although we may be largely free of terrestrial stress and obedient to the basic commandments, we are so busy with terrestrial concerns that we do not ever move into the spiritual wilderness and get about the *true business* of life. What a tragedy that by concentrating so much on performing many “good” works, this prevents us from even being able to attempt the essential saving works.

We get caught up in the seemingly urgent – “If I do not put gas in the car, I’ll be in trouble; if I do not pay this bill on time, I’ll be in trouble; if I do not get the Christmas shopping done, I’ll be in trouble!” So many worldly tasks have deadlines attached, so too often these urgent tasks get in the way of the vital things, which generally have no clear deadlines attached. For example, “If I do not study the scriptures today, the house won’t fall down; if we do not have a good family home evening this week, we’ll get by; if I do not have meaningful prayer and learn to receive revelation – well, maybe I can work that in next week.”

#### WHEN COMES THE HARVEST?

Because the experience of celestial stress is a refining process, there is no “solution” or cure for this stress. Rather, the correct response is to endure to the end. Scriptural admonitions to endure are plentiful because many “faint in [their] minds” (Hebrews 12:3). Such “fainting” may be the result of doubt, of wondering if the difficult refining wilderness experience is really worth it. While Christ can be found in the spiritual wilderness, there are times when he seems to withdraw from us, as his Father withdrew from him during the performance of his great atoning trial (Matt. 27:46). Were it not for such a withdrawal, the essential stretching and the increase of our faith would not happen (as the prophet Joseph learned in Liberty Jail). Ironically, then, we may feel most abandoned when we are most spiritually diligent.

The sixth chapter of Galatians can offer insight and motivation to help us endure: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Galatians 6:7). This oft-repeated “Law of the Harvest” is familiar, but consider for a moment why the

Lord begins with the words, “Be not deceived.” Deceived about what? Isn’t it just “plant a carrot, get a carrot”? It seems to not be tricky – except that it really is tricky. It is so easy to be deceived; for example, whenever we say things like, “Why did I waste my time trying to help that person? Why did I bother to be friendly? Why did I make the effort when he did not respond?” If this refers to sincere efforts to do good, we are being deceived. We may not see any positive outcome or reward for our honest efforts, but remember the harvest has not yet come. Alma, chapter 12, explains, “There [is] a space granted unto man” (Alma 12:12), between action and consequence, to allow for repentance – repentance that we get credit for because it is not motivated by a jolt of lightning or some other fierce and immediate threat.

We are likewise deceived if we think that God has abandoned us. When life is particularly difficult, it sometimes seems that our prayers are not being heard. Elder Neal A. Maxwell wrote concerning such times:

Inwardly and anxiously we may worry, too, that an omniscient and loving God sees more stretch in us than we feel we have. Hence, when God is actually lifting us up, we may feel he is letting us down. (Maxwell, 1994, p.3)

Nevertheless, we must not be deceived. God does not abandon his people. A favorite hymn (“How Firm a Foundation,” Hymn #85, verse 7) reminds us:

The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose  
I will not, I cannot, desert to his foes;  
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,  
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake!

Galatians chapter 6 continues, “And let us not be weary in well doing; for in due season” – again God talks about time – “we shall reap, if we faint not” (Galatians 6:9). Note that “in due season” is a code phrase for “not as soon as you’d like it to be.” It is not an easy course. Indeed, it cannot be an easy course and successfully build Zion people. But the promises are sure; the harvest is coming. As the Lord told Nephi:

I will also be your light in the wilderness ... wherefore, inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall be led towards the promised land; and ye shall know that it is by me that ye are led. (1 Nephi 17:13)

It has been said (extrapolating from John 8:32), "the truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable." This is so often true. This discussion is not about stress *elimination* – which would be a vain hope in a world designed to prove and refine – this is about stress *selection*. We do not have to be subject to every kind of stress there is. We can choose to waste our lives with telestial, or even terrestrial, stress. There are wasted lives all around, the lives of those who flout the commandments of God, and do so with impunity. Eventually, they will reap the whirlwind (Hosea 8:7). The ultimate outcome of telestial stress is destruction, tragedy, waste. And, many choose to struggle with terrestrial stress. Much temporal good may be accomplished by such people, but ultimately, they get lost in the "thick of thin things." Tragically, some individuals who remained trapped by terrestrial stress eventually burn out and then are too ready to "throw the baby out with the bath water," dismissing not only earthly concerns but often the Church as well; they mistakenly blame the Church for requiring too much of them.

Our last great choice is celestial stress. If we learn to appropriately balance terrestrial concerns, we can enter the celestial spiritual wilderness; following the admonitions of the prophets, we simplify and leave the world – worldliness – behind: "in the world but not of the world" (Widtsoe, 1942; Cullimore, 1974). Still in the world, but no longer of it (John 17:11-19), we come to know the Savior. This is a path of individual tutelage; only the Savior can teach us how to become like him. He can whisper through his spirit those precious communications concerning what we personally must do. It is too noisy in the rest of the world. Indeed, if we are caught up in the terrestrial, we won't hear that voice.

Isaiah (55:1-2), seeing our day and time, asks the very relevant question:

Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labor for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money [because what the Lord is offering is not a commodity of this world. Indeed, it is a trap to think we can buy ourselves out of stress; that if we had just a little more money, a little more income, a little more resource, we could be more stress-free – but it is not true] ... he that hath no money; come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Brothers and sisters, it is my testimony that the gospel of Jesus Christ does have the answers to our stressful lives, and that we can be a tremendous blessing to those around us – to ourselves, to our families, to those with whom we associate, to our clients, to those whom we serve in our callings – if we understand the particular kind of stress we are dealing with. It is my prayer that we will follow the prophet and get ourselves into that celestial spiritual wilderness, where the real work of life can begin. There we can fulfill the measure of our creation – ultimately, completely – and become *men and women of Christ*, a force for good, for building the kingdom. Whether we are here or not when Christ comes again, we are influencing the generations that will be here to receive him. Are we teaching them the principles of the gospel that apply now to their busy and stressful lives? I pray that we will do so. I know that we will find Christ in this journey; he will be our light and lead us to our Promised Land.

## REFERENCES

- Adler, J. & McCormick, J. (1994, August 15). A week in the death of America. *Newsweek*, 123, 24-29.
- Anderson, L. (1994, February). The stresses of life. *Ensign*, 47-49.
- Cullimore, J. (1974, January). To be in the world but not of the world. *Ensign*, 119-122.
- De Hoyos, G. (1986). Telestial, terrestrial, and celestial therapy: A Mormon therapeutic model. *AMCAP Journal*, 12:2,116-133.
- Dunn, P. (1979, May). Because I have a father. *Ensign*, pp. 7-9.
- Maxwell, N. (1994). *Lord, increase our faith*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft
- Packer, B. (1992, May). Our moral environment. *Ensign*, pp. 66-68.
- Packer, B. (1990). Let them govern themselves. Address presented at the Regional Representative Seminar, Friday March 30, 1990.
- Richards, C. (1966). *J. Golden Kimball: The story of a unique personality*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft.
- Widtsoe, J. (1942, September). Why are the Latter-day Saints a peculiar people? *Improvement Era*, 577, 607. Reprinted in "I have a question," *Ensign* (1988, April), 50.