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Elder Dale G. Renlund

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Elder Dale G. Renlund

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Constructing Spiritual Stability

ELDER DALE G. RENLUND

Elder Dale G. Renlund is a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy. This devotional address was given on September 16, 2014.

Let me begin by relating an obscure historical event, and then I will draw out some lessons that can be learned from this remote maritime misfortune.

In the early seventeenth century, Sweden was a world power. Sweden's king, Gustav II Adolf, commissioned a warship that would be christened the *Vasa*. The ship represented a substantial outlay of resources, particularly the oak from which the vessel would be built. Oak was so valuable that cutting down an oak tree without authorization was a capital offense. Gustav Adolf closely oversaw the construction process, attempting to ensure that the *Vasa* would fully realize his expectations.

After construction had begun, Gustav Adolf ordered the *Vasa* to be made longer. Because the width supports had already been built from precious oak, the king directed the builders to increase the ship's length without increasing its width. Although the shipwrights knew that doing so would compromise the *Vasa's* seaworthiness, they were hesitant to tell the king something they knew he did not want to hear. They complied. Gustav Adolf also insisted that this ship have not simply the customary single deck of guns but cannons on

three decks, with the heaviest cannons on the upper deck. Again, against their better judgment, the shipwrights complied.

Over the course of several years, shipwrights, carpenters, rope makers, and others worked diligently to build the *Vasa*. Over one thousand oak trees were used to complete the ship. It had sixty-four cannons and masts taller than 150 feet. To give the ship the opulence befitting a king's flagship, several hundred gilded and painted sculptures were added.

On August 10, 1628, the *Vasa* began its maiden voyage. In view of countless spectators, the ship left its mooring directly below the royal castle in Stockholm. After being pulled along by anchors for the first several hundred feet, the *Vasa* left the shelter of the harbor. A stronger wind entered its sails, and the ship began to tip. The *Vasa* righted itself slightly, but only temporarily. Before long, as recorded by an observer, "she heeled right over and water gushed in through the gun ports until she slowly went to the bottom under sail, pennants and all."¹ The *Vasa's* maiden voyage was about 4,200 feet.

The *Vasa* rested at the bottom of the Baltic Sea until it was recovered three centuries later in 1961. It was successfully raised from the seabed and towed back to Stockholm. Today the *Vasa* rests in a temperature- and humidity-controlled museum in Djurgården, an island in central Stockholm. I have a model of the ship in my office at Church headquarters as a reminder of several lessons that underlie its short, tragic history.

Despite the *Vasa's* magnificent appearance, the ship was not seaworthy. The alterations in its construction resulted in it not having sufficient lateral stability to enable safe seafaring. Gustav Adolf's desire for an extravagant status symbol ruined the design of what would have been a magnificent sailing vessel, and the mightiest warship of its time. The shipbuilders' reluctance to speak up—their fear of the king's displeasure—deprived the king of their knowledge and insight. All involved lost sight of the goals of the enterprise: to protect Sweden and to promote its interests abroad. A ship that attempts to defy the laws of physics is simply a boat that won't float.

For us to successfully navigate our mortal sojourn, we also need sufficient lateral stability—which is really spiritual stability—to confront crosswinds and crosscurrents, make the necessary turns, and return safely to our heavenly home. There are things we can do to increase our spiritual stability. There are also things we can do to diminish our spiritual stability. As our spiritual stability decreases, we predictably bring consequences on ourselves that could have been avoided. I will touch on four matters that help us build spiritual stability.

Obeying God's Commandments

The first is obeying God's commandments. Just as the *Vasa* was subject to physical laws—even if it was designed by a king—we are all subject to spiritual laws. No one is exempt. We need to obey these spiritual laws, which we refer to as God's commandments.

Imagine if Gustav Adolf had been frankly informed that building a long, skinny, top-heavy ship ignored a physical law related to lateral stability. Imagine him then saying, in a sullen, adolescent, whiny manner: "That's not fair. I'm the king. I should be able to do whatever I want. You don't understand."

Working with the physical laws related to lateral stability in the ship's construction might have felt restrictive to Gustav Adolf, but the *Vasa* would not have sunk before its mission started had it complied with these laws. Instead, it would have had the freedom and flexibility to accomplish what it was intended to do.

So, too, obedience to God's laws preserves our freedom, flexibility, and ability to achieve our potential. The commandments are not intended to restrict us. Rather, obedience leads to increased spiritual stability and long-term happiness.

Imagine fighting life's crosscurrents and crosswinds without spiritual stability. There is a reason obedience is the first law of heaven. Obedience is our choice. The Savior made this clear. As stated in the Joseph Smith Translation of Luke 14:28, Jesus directed, "Wherefore, settle this in your hearts, that ye will do the things which I shall teach, and command you."

It is that simple. Settle it. Decide now to be exactly obedient. As we do so, our spiritual stability will be greatly enhanced. We will avoid squandering God-given resources and making unproductive and destructive detours in our lives.

In 1980 my wife, daughter, and I moved to Baltimore, Maryland. Soon after our arrival we were invited to a ward party at the home of a member. We were told it was to be a crab feast. We were excited, but we really didn't know what to expect. Our experience with seafood consisted of trout, canned salmon, and pickled herring. As we came to the member's backyard, we saw that newspapers had been spread on picnic tables and steaming bushels filled with red creatures the size of my fist had been dumped out on them.

My wife, Ruth, asked, "What are these?" referring to the red creatures.

We were informed that these were Maryland blue crabs, which turn bright red when they are steamed.

Ruth asked, “How do you catch them?”

We were told that early that morning, two of the brethren had gone to a butcher shop and purchased a bucket of chicken necks. As you know, chicken necks look like chicken and smell like chicken when cooked, but if that is what you are given for dinner, you will go hungry. The chicken neck consists of bone, tendon, and skin.

The assigned men had gone out in a skiff on the shallow Chesapeake Bay. In water about eight feet deep, they began the process of catching a crab. They tied a chicken neck to a string, dropped it into the water, and allowed it to settle on the sandy ocean floor. Sensing a potential feast, a crab scurried along the bottom and grabbed the chicken neck with its big claw. The men then slowly and steadily began pulling on the string. The crab held on to the chicken neck, and just as it was about to breach the surface of the bay, the crab became agitated and let go. But by that time the men had placed a small net under the crab. They took it out of the water and flung it into the boat. And, voilà: ward dinner!

Ruth said, “So, that’s it? There’s no hook? There’s no rod? There’s no reel?”

“That’s right,” they replied.

She said, “The crab could let go at any time?”

“Right.”

“But they don’t?”

“No,” was the reply.

Ruth summed up this newfound knowledge by saying, “Boy, are those crabs stupid!”

If you were writing a pamphlet called *For the Strength of Young Crabs*, it would be pretty short, wouldn’t it? It would say, “Lay off the chicken necks! They are a trap. Don’t be fooled.”

There are many chicken necks in the world: things that look enticing, things that look like a veritable feast, and things that seem worth a minor detour. But if we take that detour, we will, like the prodigal in the parable, experience a fleeting paroxysm of enjoyment followed by degradation ranging from slight to abysmal and misery ranging from small to unutterable before coming to ourselves and recognizing the mistake. The mistake is that these detours are traps.

We can look at each commandment separately and decide whether to obey or not, rationalize disobedience or not, or we can simply settle it in our hearts that we will do the things that the Lord teaches and commands. Nothing will

increase spiritual stability more. Nothing will give us greater freedom to accomplish our life’s mission. “Faithfulness and obedience” are not only “the marks of true discipleship”; they are “the requisites of true freedom.”²

Heeding Counsel and Becoming Lifelong Learners

Second, we need to pay attention and give heed to counsel we receive from trusted sources and commit ourselves to becoming lifelong determined learners. Sometimes we can become like Gustav Adolf, unwilling to listen to counsel from even trusted sources if that counsel does not conform to our biases and desires. We can create an environment that makes others become like the shipbuilders, fearful of giving their best counsel and advice. When we fail to invite and heed counsel from trusted sources, we decrease our spiritual stability and fall into the trap of building a tall, skinny, top-heavy spiritual ship—a boat that won’t float.

President Henry B. Eyring has pointed out that one of the pitfalls of gaining knowledge is the development of hubris,³ which is the arrogance that can come when we think we know so much that there is nothing left to learn. We have all seen this in individuals who are too certain of their own brilliance. It is really hard to teach a know-it-all. This educational hubris can occur in both students and university professors, in inexperienced as well as experienced Church leaders, and in new converts and longtime members of the Church. It appears that the risk, however, is greater in those with more education and more experience.

Mindful of this risk and desirous to be a lifelong determined learner, President Eyring said, “I am still a child with lots to learn. Most folks can teach me something.”⁴ When he extended the call to me to be a General Authority, President Eyring taught me an important lesson. He said that when he hears someone tell a story that he has heard before or use a scripture that he is very familiar with, he asks himself the questions why is the Lord underlining that for me? and what have I yet to learn from that story or scripture? Likewise, if we wish to increase our spiritual stability, we will be willing to learn and we will be sufficiently humble to accept guidance no matter our age and experience.

On one occasion I was assigned to accompany Elder Neal A. Maxwell, then of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, to a stake conference. It was marvelous to be with one of the most remarkable gospel teachers of this dispensation. At the conference I gained an insight into how he had developed

and magnified what was undoubtedly a God-given gift. As we were driving away from the stake center on Saturday evening, he turned in his seat and asked me, “What could I have done better to teach the principles we taught?”

I thought he had to be joking. But he kept on grilling me until he extracted from me a comment about some minor thing that might have been slightly unclear. The next day, in the Sunday general session of the stake conference, he clarified that minor thing that I had mentioned. I realized that I was with a humble disciple of Jesus Christ who welcomed counsel, was committed to being a lifelong determined learner, and desired to become better.

How we receive counsel makes a difference in whether those around us will feel comfortable in giving us counsel. We can become prickly, cantankerous, and defensive, or we can welcome the input, knowing it is given with loving motives and, if taken in the right spirit, will help us learn and improve.

It really is our choice. We can listen to and heed counsel given to us by Church leaders, especially those we sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators; by parents; and by trusted friends—or not. We can seek to be determined lifelong learners—or not. We can increase our spiritual stability—or not. If we fail to increase our spiritual stability, we will become like the *Vasa*: a long, skinny, top-heavy ship—a boat that won’t float.

Serving Others

Third, being outwardly directed, caring about others, and serving others increases our spiritual stability. It is akin to constructing an outrigger for a canoe. Such an outrigger dramatically increases the canoe’s lateral stability.

A desire to help others is paradoxically both a consequence of true conversion and an attribute that helps us remain converted. President Marion G. Romney stated, “Service is not something we endure on this earth so we can earn the right to live in the celestial kingdom. Service is the very fiber of which an exalted life in the celestial kingdom is made.”⁵

Eternity stays in clearer focus when we focus on others as we seek to help Heavenly Father’s children in some way. I have always found it much easier to receive inspiration when I am praying to find out how I can help another than when I am simply praying for myself.

We may believe that at some future point we will be in a better situation to help our fellowman. In reality, now is the time. Having this “fiber” of service become part of who we are is not situational. We are sorely mistaken if we think that at some future point it will be more convenient when we have

more time, more money, or more anything to serve others better. Now is the time to begin. Our spiritual stability will instantly improve.

My father taught my brother, sisters, and me that helping others is a duty, a choice that we make regardless of our own circumstances. My dad was born in northern Finland, outside the town of Jakobstad, which is also known as Pietasaari. He loved Finnish literature, especially the works of a Finnish poet, Johan Ludvig Runeberg. Runeberg had also been born in Jakobstad.

Dad would quote Finnish literature at night as bedtime stories. These stories were really rather somber. It seemed to us as children that the moral of these stories was to fight valiantly against impossible odds and then die. It was like listening to the book of Job without the happy ending.

One of Runeberg’s poems that we heard over and over told the story of Farmer Paavo. Paavo was a poor peasant farmer who lived with his wife and children in Saarijärvi in the lake region of central Finland. Several years in a row, some combination of the runoff from the spring snowmelt, summer hailstorms, or an early autumn frost killed most of his crop.

Each time the meager harvest came in, his wife said, “Paavo, Paavo, you unfortunate old man. God has forsaken us.”

Paavo, in turn, said, “Woman, mix bark with the rye flour to make bread so we won’t go hungry. I will work harder to drain the marshy fields. God is testing us, but He will provide.”

Every time the crop was destroyed, Paavo directed his wife to double the amount of bark that she mixed into the bread to ward off starvation. Poor Paavo worked even harder. He dug ditches to drain the marsh to decrease his fields’ susceptibility to the spring snowmelt and to the exposure of an early autumn frost.

Finally, Paavo harvested a rich crop. Overjoyed, his wife said, “Paavo, Paavo, these are happy times! It is time to throw away the bark and bake bread made only with the rye.”

But Paavo took his wife’s hand and said, “Woman, mix the bread with half bark, for our neighbor’s fields have frosted over.”⁶

Left unstated in the poem was Paavo’s intent to help his devastated, destitute neighbor.

As I have reread that story as an adult, I have come to understand a little bit better what my dad was trying to teach me and my siblings. Regardless of circumstances, we have a choice. Will we help others or not? We flunk a significant test of mortality if we do not choose to help those in need. And if

we do help, we increase our own spiritual stability. Serving others allows us to express that fiber of which an exalted life in the celestial kingdom is made.

Making Jesus Christ Our Foundation

Fourth, finally, and most important, our spiritual stability increases in proportion to the degree to which we establish Jesus Christ as our foundation. The prophet Mormon lamented the change that occurred when his people stopped making Christ their foundation. Of those who abandon the sure moorings of faith in Christ, he stated, “They are led about by Satan, even as chaff is driven before the wind, or as a vessel is tossed about upon the waves, without sail or anchor, or without anything wherewith to steer her; and even as she is, so are they” (Mormon 5:18).

Without Christ, we are driven like a vessel tossed about upon the waves. We have no power because we have no sail. We have no stability, especially in times of storm, because we have no anchor. We have no direction or purpose because we don’t have anything with which to steer.

If we wish to avoid navigating through life in a long, skinny, top-heavy ship, we must make Christ our foundation and seek His counsel. The ultimate in educational hubris is to believe ourselves to be so wise that we do not need to seek direction from the Lord through the Holy Ghost. Remember, “to be learned is good if [we] hearken unto the counsels of God” (2 Nephi 9:29; see also verse 28).

Conclusion

In order to face, overcome, and be prepared for the crosswinds and crosscurrents of life, we must obey God’s commandments; become humble, willing, and determined lifelong learners; serve others; and establish Jesus Christ as the foundation of our lives. As we do so, we dramatically increase our spiritual stability. Unlike the *Vasa*, we will be able to return to safe harbor, having fulfilled our destiny.

Not too long ago, in the central part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ruth and I met with a large number of Latter-day Saints who live in impoverished circumstances. I asked the assembled congregation, “What are your challenges?”

There was no response. I asked again. Again, there was no response. I asked a third time.

Finally, an older man stood slowly and asked me in all sincerity, “Elder Renlund, how can we have any challenges? We have the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Initially I felt like grabbing him and telling him to look around. They had nothing—no electricity and no running water. But then I understood. It is not what they possess that gives them strength; it is what they know. Their commitment to what they know gives them extraordinary spiritual stability. They keep the commandments. They are determined to be lifelong learners of spiritual things. They help each other. And they have Christ as their foundation.

My dear brothers and sisters, I testify to you that our Redeemer lives. I know that Jesus Christ rose from the tomb. I know that the resurrected Lord, along with God our Heavenly Father, appeared to the Prophet Joseph that day in 1820, just as Joseph said. I know that we are led by God’s prophet on the earth today, President Thomas S. Monson. But it is Jesus Christ who directs this work through His prophet and through others whom we sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators. I know that this is true. I pray the richest blessings to be upon you as you go through your mortal sojourn and navigate this challenging, wonderful life. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. **RE**

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Notes

1. Letter from the Swedish Council of the Realm to King Gustav II Adolf; translation quoted in Richard O. Mason, “The *Vasa* Capsizes,” virtualschool.edu/mon/CaseStudies/Vasa/vasa.html. Many accounts of the *Vasa* exist; see, for instance, vasamuseet.se/en for history and other links.
2. Frederic W. Farrar, *The Life of Christ* (London: Cassell and Company, 1874; repr., Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994), 416; see also John 8:31–32.
3. See Robert I. Eaton and Henry J. Eyring, *I Will Lead You Along: The Life of Henry B. Eyring* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 405–6.
4. Eaton and Eyring, *I Will Lead You Along*, 409.
5. Marion G. Romney, “The Celestial Nature of Self-Reliance,” *Ensign*, November 1982, 93.
6. Johan Ludvig Runeberg, “Högt Bland Saarijärvis Moar” [“High Among Saarijärvi Moor,” also called “Farmer Paavo” or “The Peasant Paavo”], in Eemil Nestor Setälä, Viljo Tarkiainen, and Vihtori Laurila, eds., *Suomen Kansalliskirjallisuus* [Finnish National Literature]: *Valikoima Suomen Kirjallisuuden Huomattavimpia Tuotteita*, vol. 9, *Juhana Ludvig Runeberg ja Sakari Topelius* (Helsinki: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Otava, 1941), 50–52; see sv.wikisource.org/wiki/författare:Johan_Ludvig_Runeberg. The translation from Runeberg’s original Swedish is mine.