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Katarzyna Bialasiewicz, Young Women Hugging Worried Friend, 123RF.

Filled with Joy

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Two years ago our commissioner, Elder Kim B. Clark, taught us from 3 Nephi of the angels and children who were encircled about with fire. He taught us that as religious educators, we too should be encircled about by that holy fire.¹ There is, as you know, another account in the Book of Mormon of individuals being surrounded by heavenly flames. Lehi and Nephi had been thrown into prison, and the account says: “They were as if in the midst of a flaming fire. . . . And behold, the Holy Spirit of God did come down from heaven, . . . and they were filled as if with fire” (Helaman 5:44–45). The account also says, “And they were filled with that joy which is unspeakable and full of glory” (Helaman 5:44).

My message today is this: As religious educators, we should not only be encircled about with fire; we should also be filled with joy. Students should *learn* in our classrooms about the “plan of happiness,” but they should also *see* in us evidence that the plan works—that living the gospel brings joy. In

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the dream of the tree of life, Lehi beckoned to his family to come partake of a fruit that “was desirable to make one happy” (1 Nephi 8:10). His invitation had a power and an authenticity because he spoke from experience. He had partaken and felt that joy himself.

President Gordon B. Hinckley said: “It is very important to be happy in this work. We have a lot of gloomy people in the Church because they do not understand, I guess, that this is the gospel of happiness.”² We can have the happiness that President Hinckley spoke of by receiving the Spirit in our lives and then, as the scripture says, living “after the manner of happiness” (2 Nephi 5:27).

I want to offer for your consideration some principles that have helped me, as a religious educator, live “after the manner of happiness.” They are not profound or new ideas, and I mention them in the hope of helping someone live and teach with more joy. I speak not only to those who are religious educators by profession but to those who, for a season, live the life of a “called” religious educator in seminaries and institutes.

Many years ago I came across a quote by President Spencer W. Kimball that troubled me. He said, “Let us lay hold on happiness today; for know this, if you are not happy today, you may never be happy.”³

That can’t be right, I thought. What about repentance? If I am not happy today, can’t I do something to change that? I gave it more thought, and I believe the intent of President Kimball’s message was this: If you are not happy and believe that you could be happy if only your circumstances were different, you may never be happy because happiness is not tied to your circumstances. One author expressed it this way: “We tend to believe that if we were somewhere else—on vacation, with another partner, in a different career, a different home, a different circumstance—somehow we would be happier and more content. We wouldn’t! The truth is, if you have destructive mental habits . . . or if you’re constantly wishing things were different, these identical tendencies will follow you, wherever you go.”⁴

Laman and Lemuel believed their happiness was tied to circumstances—especially circumstances that would keep them comfortable. Speaking of their wilderness journey, they said: “[Our wives] have borne children in the wilderness and suffered all things, save it were death; and it would have been better that they had died before they came out of Jerusalem than to have suffered these afflictions. Behold, these many years we have suffered in the wilderness,

which time we might have enjoyed our possessions and the land of our inheritance; yea, and we might have been happy” (1 Nephi 17:20–21).

I have learned that my happiness is not tied to where I live, the assignment I have, whom I work with, the students I have, or opportunities that have not come. I am not suggesting that having a “good attitude” will make your challenges go away and fill life with sunshine. The circumstances we sometimes find ourselves in can be heart-wrenching and almost unbearable. But I give my witness that even in those circumstances, there can be a heaven-sent spirit and perspective that can make life joyful.

A verse in the book of Alma says, “This is the account of Ammon and his brethren, their journeyings in the land of Nephi, their *sufferings* in the land, their *sorrows*, and their *afflictions*, and their *incomprehensible joy*” (Alma 28:8; emphasis added). Sorrow and joy are not mutually exclusive. As a called teacher, you might be wishing you had a different calling. As an employed teacher, you might be wishing you had a different assignment. It’s okay to wish, but please remember your happiness is not tied to having your wish come true. Happiness is a manner of traveling, not a destination. If you live your life thinking it is a destination, you may never be happy.

How does one find happiness, whatever the circumstances may be? I don’t know all the answers, but I offer an important one: Gratitude has a lot to do with living “after the manner of happiness.” President Dieter F. Uchtdorf said:

I’m suggesting that instead of being thankful *for* things, we focus on being thankful *in* our circumstances—whatever they may be. . . .

This type of gratitude transcends whatever is happening around us. . . . It blooms just as beautifully in the icy landscape of winter as it does in the pleasant warmth of summer. . . .

Being grateful *in* our circumstances is an act of faith in God. . . .

True gratitude is an expression of hope *and* testimony.⁵

Let me offer another principle that has helped me live and teach with more joy. A few years into my career, I made the decision to leave seminaries and institutes. I came to that decision because I didn’t think I was as good as the teachers I saw around me. I saw teachers who were engaging, scholarly, humorous, and confident—and I saw little of that in myself. In the end, I did not leave seminaries and institutes, but I continued to wrestle inside as I wondered if my personality could effectively teach and help youth.

Speaking of our unique personalities, Sister Patricia Holland, the wife of Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, said this:

Our Father in heaven needs us as we are, as we are growing to become. He has intentionally made us different from one another so that even with our imperfections we can fulfill his purposes. My greatest misery comes when I feel I have to fit what others are doing, or what I think others expect of me. I am most happy when I am comfortable being me and trying to do what my Father in heaven and I expect me to be.

For many years I tried to measure the oft-times quiet, reflective, thoughtful Pat Holland against the robust, bubbly, talkative, and energetic Jeff Holland and others with like qualities. I have learned through several fatiguing failures that you can't have joy in being bubbly if you are not a bubbly person. It is a contradiction in terms. I have given up seeing myself as a flawed person. . . . Giving this up has freed me to embrace and rejoice in my own manner and personality. . . .

Somewhere, somehow the Lord “blipped the message onto my screen” that my personality was created to fit precisely the mission and talents he gave me. . . . I have found that I have untold abundant sources of energy to be myself. But the moment I indulge in imitation of my neighbor, I feel fractured and fatigued and find myself forever swimming upstream. When we frustrate God's plan for us, we deprive this world and God's kingdom of our unique contributions.⁶

In being yourself, may I offer two cautions. First, I am not suggesting that we live with an attitude that says, “That's just the way I am.” President Russell M. Nelson has said, “The gospel of Jesus Christ *is* a gospel of change.”⁷ I should eagerly seek feedback from my leaders on how I can change and better align my personality and my efforts in achieving our objective. More importantly, I have a mandate given by Christ himself that I am to become even as he is. But I don't have to be like the teacher down the hall. My personality, enhanced by the gifts of the Spirit, can make a unique contribution to the work of seminaries and institutes.

The second caution: When I first came to the Central Office to take a new assignment, our administrator at the time, Elder Paul V. Johnson, invited me to his office for some instruction and counsel. Among other things, he said, “Don't define yourself.” I understood that to mean that if I ever defined for the Lord how he could best use me in accomplishing his work, I might limit my opportunities for growth and service.

Unfortunately, I fell prey to the very thing he warned me against. I tried to do my best in the administrative assignment he asked me to fill, but I murmured in my heart. “I am not an administrator,” I told myself. “I am a teacher. I should be in the classroom, not sitting in meetings.” It was a long and painful process before I learned that my professed desire to be teaching was just a cloak to cover a desire to fulfill my own personal needs. Spending your time with students and the scriptures is very rewarding. Spending your

day in meetings discussing policies, not quite so. But that is beside the point. Do I do this work for personal reward and fulfillment, or do I do it with an eye single to God's glory and purposes?

I hope you will be wiser than I was and will not define yourself and how you should be used. There is a singular happiness that comes in submitting to the will of the Father, as the Savior repeatedly taught and demonstrated.



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There is a singular happiness that comes in submitting to the will of the Father, as the Savior repeatedly taught and demonstrated.

This matter of submitting leads me to another suggestion that can help us live “after the manner of happiness” as religious educators. I am confident that most of us genuinely want to submit to the will of our Heavenly Father. It becomes more challenging when we are asked to submit to the mortals here on earth that the Lord uses to direct his work, be it in a ward, a stake, or seminaries and institutes. I have known in my career very capable teachers who have taken offense at the actions of a leader or to a policy that they didn't agree with. Whether the injustices were real or perceived, these teachers guarded and nurtured their hurt—all at the cost of their own happiness.

Their hurt often turned to bitterness, which then led to contention with others, especially those who supervised them.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell once wrote: “Life in the Church [and I would add, life in seminaries and institutes] means experiencing a variety of leaders not all of whom are always wise, mature, and deft. In fact, some of us are as bumpy and uneven as a sackful of old doorknobs. Some of the polishing we experience is actually a result of grinding against each other. How vital patience and lubricating love are in such circumstances!”⁸

I cannot emphasize enough how important “patience and lubricating love” are for a religious educator. They are essential for finding happiness and teaching with the Spirit.

President Boyd K. Packer said: “A man who says he will sustain the President of the Church or the General Authorities but cannot sustain his own bishop is deceiving himself. The man who will not sustain the bishop of his ward and the president of his stake will not sustain the President of the Church.”⁹

Time does not allow for further comment, but there is a principle in that statement that I believe applies to religious educators and their relationship with those who have been appointed to lead them. If any of you have ill feelings toward the administration, toward a particular leader or policy, or for being looked over or for being too closely looked at, I plead with you to let it go, for your own sake. Happiness will forever elude the individual who won’t forgive, who spreads their discontent to others, or who fosters contention.

Now, for my last suggestion. Just hours before the Savior’s death, he washed the Apostles’ feet and then said: “If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet. . . . If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them” (John 13:14, 17).

Much of the happiness we can experience in life will come as we forget ourselves and focus our thoughts and service on others. For the religious educator there is great happiness to be found as we center our thoughts, desires, and efforts on blessing our students. Speaking to religious educators, President Spencer W. Kimball once said that the “growth and development” of our young people should be our “grand and magnificent obsession.”¹⁰ If our focus should ever turn away from our students and begin to center on our own needs, comforts, fulfillment, or recognition, there will be a significant loss in our power to teach effectively, not to mention the loss of much of our own happiness.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, a Protestant pastor of the last century, wrote:

Some Christians carry their religion on their backs. It is a packet of beliefs and practices which they must bear. At times it grows heavy and they would willingly lay it down, but that would mean a break with old traditions, so they shoulder it again. But real Christians do not carry their religion, their religion carries them. It is not weight; it is wings. It lifts them up, it sees them over hard places, it makes the universe seem friendly, life purposeful, hope real, sacrifice worthwhile. It sets them free from fear, futility, discouragement, and sin—the great enslavers of men’s souls. You can know a real Christian, when you see him, by his buoyancy.¹¹

It is my hope and prayer for each of you that the gospel is, in fact, wings and not weight, that you are surrounded by fire and filled with joy, and that your own happiness will invite others to seek and follow the source of your happiness, which is the Lord Jesus Christ. I bear witness that he was the happiest person to ever walk this earth, and he invites us to come follow him in living “after the manner of happiness.” In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. **RE**

Notes

1. Kim B. Clark, “Encircled About with Fire” (Seminaries and Institutes of Religion satellite broadcast, 4 August 2015), <https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/article/satellite-training-broadcast/2015/08/encircled-about-with-fire>.
2. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 256.
3. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 173.
4. Richard Carlson, *Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff. . . and It’s All Small Stuff* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 133.
5. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Grateful in Any Circumstances,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 75–76.
6. Patricia T. Holland, “Portraits of Eve: God’s Promises of Personal Identity,” in *LDS Women’s Treasury: Insights and Inspirations for Today’s Woman* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 97–98.
7. Russell M. Nelson, “Decisions for Eternity,” *Ensign*, 20 November 2013, 108.
8. Neal A. Maxwell, *If Thou Endure It Well* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 99.
9. Boyd K. Packer, “Follow the Brethren” (Brigham Young University devotional, 23 March 1965), https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/boyd-k-packer_follow-brethren/; also in *Liabona*, September 1979, 53.
10. Spencer W. Kimball, “Men of Example” (address to Church Educational System religious educators, 12 September 1975; booklet), 7; also in *Teaching Seminary: Preservice Readings* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 26.
11. Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Twelve Tests of Character* (New York: Association Press, 1923), 87–88; quoted in L. Tom Perry, “A Year of Jubilee,” *Ensign*, November 1999, 77.