The Eternal Verities and the Helping Professions

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It is an honor to be asked to speak to your fine organization though I am among the least of the least and the last ordained. Neither do I possess an intimate knowledge of your respective helping professions. In earlier years, I was exposed somewhat to your respective disciplines first while serving as administrator of Utah’s Juvenile Court System, then as Director of Utah Family Services, and later as Director of State Social Services which twenty years ago included Health, Corrections, Mental Health, Welfare, Drugs, and Alcoholism, and assorted other public agencies focused on human problems. In those roles I also came to understand somewhat the wide range of personal tragedy and human pathology that impacted so many served by these public agencies and which your professions seek to alleviate.

If my understanding of current social indicators is correct, the breadth and depth of such human suffering and personal tragedies you face as professionals have only greatly intensified in the intervening twenty years. I would assume at times to some of you these problems seem beyond the pale of human wisdom and of your professional skills and training. Indeed, we live in a world whose challenges require our collective best efforts and especially the blessings and influence of God Almighty. To paraphrase President Kimball, God loves us all, but it is usually through the service of another of His children that He meets our needs.
I have read and been lifted by reading the remarks made by Church general authorities in earlier conference meetings of your group. Two things about your organization strike me as especially significant. First, the letter M of your organization implies a special fellowship tied to a belief in basic religious truths and core values of the Church that bind your helping professions together. This seems to me to represent a positive statement of your own faith and belief structure. The second fact is that you meet at general conference time. This suggests that many of you also hold significant ecclesiastical responsibilities in the Church. In both instances, I salute you for what your name and meeting scheduling imply. I would be particularly negligent if I did not express my deep gratitude to those of you who have significantly assisted me when I served as Bishop and Stake President. Your service was invaluable and indispensable.

Lacking in specific professional credentials and as a humble servant of the Lord, I would like to speak to you about a few simple experiences that have been helpful to me in my personal odyssey and which I pray will be in the Spirit of your gathering together to edify and strengthen each other in these meetings.

My mother, who was a widow for 47 years, was almost 96 years of age when she passed away in our home a few years ago. She was a daughter of humble Church converts from the British Isles. Her mother was a young orphan when she joined the Church and emigrated to this valley about the same time as her husband-to-be, my grandfather, also joined the Church as a boy in England. They met and married here well over a century ago. My mother was only seven years of age and one of several children when her father suddenly became ill and died working at the granite quarry cutting stone for the Salt Lake Temple.

Despite the challenges and deprivation of her early years, mother had a great desire to be led into opportunities for growth and service consistent with her faith. In her late teens she was called to take a special nurse training course sponsored by the Church General Relief Society Board. She was set apart to this calling by B.H. Roberts who promised her “that the Spirit of nursing would be with her from that day forward.”
The Relief Society training course whet her appetite to receive more professional preparation. In those years at the turn of the century there was no accredited program for registered nurses in this state. She traveled to Chicago where she was denied acceptance to a major nurse training facility because of her Mormon faith. She then went to Battle Creek, Michigan, where the newly established Kellogg Sanitarium operated by the Seventh Day Adventists admitted her. Upon graduation three years later, she was invited to remain as a member of the faculty. Fortunately for me and my five siblings, she returned to Salt Lake where she married my father. He was thirty-five years old, and she was thirty-three. But in 1932, after six children and fifteen years of marriage—and at the height of the great depression—my father died suddenly. My oldest brother died 10 days later.

I recount her history to make the point that she felt throughout her life—including 47 years of widowhood—that her chosen field of professional training was an extension of her religious belief. In my judgment that commitment never wavered. She passed away in my home a few years ago with a large picture of the Savior in constant full view at the front of her bed. She watched with satisfaction the improvements in medical and nursing care over her lifetime.

She was an honored guest as the oldest registered nurse in Utah when the University of Utah's new college of nursing building was dedicated several years ago. After inspecting the wonderful new facilities from her wheelchair, she responded, "This is all very wonderful, I just hope that it is not a substitute for the true spirit of nursing and serving which should characterize the profession."

I am comforted by the inspired teaching in our faith that all truth can be circumscribed into one great whole. A faithful believing Latter-day Saint should be equally at home in the temples of our Lord or academies of secular learning if his or her life is grounded in what Elder Richard L. Evans used to call the "eternal verities." To me these eternal verities include the recognition of man's identity as a Son of God and that the spiritual gifts of faith, courage, hope, humility, kindness, repentance, forgiveness should characterize and be the bedrock of our professional practice.
As professionals, I believe you can take heart in this latter-day scripture, "Intelligence cleaveth unto intelligence; wisdom receiveth wisdom; truth embraceth truth; virtue loveth virtue; light cleaveth unto light" (Doctrine and Covenants 88: 40). Also, "That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until that perfect day" (Doctrine and Covenants 50: 24).

Some time after he was called to the Twelve, Elder Russell M. Nelson taught a great truth to Church educators. During an interview during a Church Education System Symposium in Elder Nelson while responding to a question, thoughtfully described the interactive process and intimate relationship of the practice of his own medical profession and his personal faith and testimony. The question posed to Elder Nelson on that occasion was "What are your feelings about healing by faith?" He responded:

All blessings are predicated upon law (see Doctrine and Covenants 130: 21). Faith is part of that law. The power of the priesthood is real, being the power by which worlds have been created and the dead restored to life. The interrelation of these forces may best be illustrated by relating an experience I had with President Kimball that he has given me permission to relate.

About three weeks after I had implanted a pacemaker in President Kimball, his personal physician telephoned me to say that it was working only intermittently. We tried everything we could to make adjustments without another operation but to no avail. So President Kimball was readmitted to the hospital, and again I stood before him in my green operating clothes. After giving me his usual greeting of warmth and love, he asked me for a priesthood blessing. After that blessing was pronounced under the promptings of the Spirit, he replied, "Now you may proceed to do the things that you must do in order to enable that blessing to be realized."

We reoperated, found the flaw in the insulation of the electrical wire, and repaired it. Now the pacemaker functions as it should. He knew and I knew that not even for God's prophet can exceptions be made to the eternal laws of the universe. Not even for God's Son could divine law be broken. Faith, priesthood power, and work necessary to comply with law were combined to bring the blessing the prophet needed at that critical hour. (From an address to Religious Educators, 13 September 1985, published by the Church Educational System.)
Elder Nelson was then asked, "Do you really have a testimony?"

His answer:

Emphatically, irrevocably, and positively, yes! I know that my Redeemer lives. I know that he is the Son of the living God. I know that this is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which he directs by prophecy and revelation through his divinely appointed priesthood authority. For this testimony, I am willing to work, to live, and to die (Ibid).

As I was reflecting on this assignment, I read an interesting interview that I believe uniquely framed the issue of the relationship of the use of gospel principles in a professional treatment setting by a well-known Latter-day Saint therapist who at the time was serving as a stake president (Carlfred Broderick). He was asked, "Do you use gospel principles in your counseling?" His answer:

I do, first, because gospel principles are subconsciously integrated into my thinking, and second, because they are principles other people can accept and act upon even though they don't understand the ultimate source. Many nonmembers have discovered the truth of them independently. I'm impressed with how many people in my profession are using the same principles of therapy the gospel would dictate: If you're nice to each other, that works better; if you're true to each other, that works better. Those are universal principles and Mormons have no copyright on them. I also employ gospel principles that are not in general use. For example, I've often said to patients: "There's a Mormon scripture that may help you. It says, 'There is a law irrevocably decreed before the foundations of this world upon which all blessings are predicated, and whenever you receive any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated.' Now, you're just not obeying the laws of getting well. And you're not going to get well until you do." And they say, "That's a neat scripture!" I've never had anybody resist it yet. I have on occasion given blessings to nonmembers. I have given them to members more often. When I give a blessing as part of the therapy, I don't charge for the session, because I would consider it simony. I've given nonmembers blessings in situations where I've felt they were of a mind to appreciate and receive them. Because they're not used to the experience, the blessing often sticks with them more than it does with a member. Those who are not accustomed to the spirit remember and later quote the blessings back to me, saying they were turning points in their therapy. So I use the gospel more directly if I think it will be received (Dialogue 13 [Summer 1980]: 59-60).
A decade ago Elder Neal A. Maxwell was asked to address this same AMCAP. A bit of counsel that he gave on that occasion resonated to the center of my heart as I read it.

Notice that we are, brothers and sisters, to seek not the things of this world but to build up the kingdom of God and to establish his righteousness (Matthew 6: 38).

To do these things first is a challenge in a wayward world—even when we know what we do about the ultimate realities of “things as they really are and of things as they really will be.” Without the precious perspective of the gospel to follow, that taxing admonition of the Lord’s is exceedingly difficult. The deep problems individuals have can only be solved by learning about “the deep things of God,” by confronting the reality of “things as they really are and things as they really will be.” Hard though this process may be, painful though it may be, it is the one true course for human happiness here and everlasting joy in the world to come. Whatever we do in our individual lives and through the influence we have on the lives of others must move us and others to come to terms with these ultimate realities. To move in another direction is folly and misery.

Revelations are not accommodations; they are directions. We may disregard them but we cannot amend them. We may fail to follow them, but we cannot erase them.

We do what we do not only for our own spiritual preservation but for the sake of others who have lost their way. Others must know that there is but one alternative to anarchy and chaos. Not several alternatives, just one. As custodians of those concepts, as keepers of those truths, we must therefore remember, as George MacDonald wisely said, “A candle is not lighted for itself, neither is a man.” The illuminated individual who really believes that the Light of Christ “lighteth every man” will go on trying—long after other helping agents have surrendered to the darkness. His light may be a little one, but lights have a way of being seen, especially in the darkness.

Please deepen your personal scriptural scholarship, for in it will be truth, relevancy, renewal and reassurance. Remember that at the very center of the deepest doctrines are the pearls of greatest price! Remember that in the Inspired Translation of the Bible the Savior’s phrase, “the key of knowledge,” is defined as “the fulness of the scriptures.” God bless you with the increasing light of the gospel, for it is by that light that you and I will see everything else—“things as they really are and things as they really will be!” (AMCAP Journal [February 1979]: 5).
I should like to conclude my comments with the final conference testimonies of Elders Bruce McConkie and Ted Tuttle. Both messages were final valedictories and testimonies of faith to the entire Church. Both at the time of their final messages were suffering from terminal cancer. I shall not forget their impressions upon my soul as I looked into their faces as they gave their inspiring counsel. The first is from Elder McConkie in the April general conference session of 1985.

And now, as pertaining to this perfect atonement, wrought by the shedding of the blood of a God—I testify that it took place in Gethsemane and at Golgotha, and as pertaining to Jesus Christ, I testify he is the Son of the Living God, who was crucified for the sins of the world. He is our Lord, our God, and our King. This I know of myself independent of any other person.

I am one of his witnesses, and in a coming day I shall feel the nail marks in his hands and in his feet and shall wet his feet with my tears. But I shall not know any better then than I know now that he is God’s Almighty Son; that he is our Savior and Redeemer; and that salvation comes in and through his atoning blood and in no other way.

God grant that all of us may walk in the light as God our Father is in the light so that, according to the promises, the blood of Jesus Christ his Son will cleanse us from all sin. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen (The Ensign [April 1985]: 11).

And finally from Elder A. Theodore Tuttle in the October 1986 conference.

I am a product of a household of faith. I learned faith in my home. I was taught it. It was drilled into me. I need that faith now as much as I ever did. I think we all do. We’re not going to survive in this world, temporally or spiritually, without increased faith in the Lord—and I don’t mean a positive mental attitude—I mean downright solid faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the only thing that gives vitality and power to otherwise rather weak individuals.

I bear you my humble witness that I know that God lives. I know that he lives, that he is our Father, that he loves us. I bear witness that Jesus is the Christ, our Savior and our Redeemer.

I understand better what that means now. I am grateful for his atonement in our behalf and for knowing something about our relationship to him and to our Heavenly Father and about the meaning and purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ (The Ensign [November 1986]).
God bless you dear brothers and sisters as you seek to perfect your professional skills with the help of him who understands all suffering. I don’t presume to counsel you in the professional side of your helping professions. I do suggest, however, the nearer you draw to the Spirit of Him whose life and atonement brings the hope of unspeakable eternal joy to each of us, the more you will bless the lives of so many you will touch. That God will grant you this desire and blessing in your lives is my humble prayer.