

BY PERSUASION, LONG-SUFFERING, MEEKNESS, AND LOVE

On Diplomacy

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Cory W. Leonard, then assistant director of the David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies at Brigham Young University, presented this essay at “The Church and International Diplomacy,” the International Society’s twenty-fourth annual conference, April 2013, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

In 2008, my awareness of “International Diplomacy and the Church” grew when the David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies at Brigham Young University commemorated its twenty-fifth anniversary. The center produced a short film titled *The Kennedy Way*, featuring never-before-seen footage from David Kennedy’s life and exploring his attributes evidenced through his family and work as an international banker, as US secretary of the treasury and ambassador to NATO, and as special representative of the First Presidency of the Church. Learning more about Kennedy confirmed why he was the ideal namesake for BYU’s flagship international core and a model of persuasion, skill, and leadership.

Efforts to address barriers to the Church’s legal recognition, explained in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* by Martin Hickman, provide an example of diplomatic work:

When President Kimball decided that legal recognition should be the first goal, he sent Kennedy to Greece, where recognition had long been withheld despite the vigorous efforts of Church leaders. Kennedy learned from his contacts in the Greek government and the U.S. embassy there that the key to recognition as “a house of prayer” required the approval of the Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, His Beatitude Seraphim. In a crucial interview, Kennedy pointed out that the Greek Orthodox Church enjoyed full freedom of religion in the United States, that the Greek government had honored President David O. McKay for the aid the Church had sent to Greece after the devastating earthquake of 1953, and that the Church was fully recognized by most of the other countries of Western Europe. Greece eventually gave legal recognition to the Church. Other countries where recognition would be sought and eventually granted included Yugoslavia, Portugal, and Poland.¹

Indeed, like David Kennedy, effective diplomats and leaders must adeptly wield the soft power of persuasion. What do we know about persuasion that may be of interest to Latter-day Saint professionals?

PERSUADE AND BE PERSUADED

Life involves persuasion. Each day, we are persuaded, and frequently we persuade others. We encounter decisions that force our resolve and judgment. We may ask: What will I make of my life? How will I make a living? How will I make a difference in the world? Or on a more basic level, how can I solve this problem, deal with this difficult personality, or convince someone to my understanding? (Toddlers are particularly difficult, in my limited experience.)

Persuasion is the art of shaping beliefs and decisions and is an essential part of our lives as citizens, professionals, and Latter-day Saints. Persuasion is also a key part of diplomacy—as it involves consensus building, decision-making, and power. It is in that regard I would like to explore the notion of persuasion.

PERSUASION AND THE GOSPEL

We recognize that the greatest power on our planet, the power to act in the name of God—or priesthood—can be “handled only upon the principles of righteousness.”² This concept is part of what President Dieter F. Uchtdorf recently referred to as the “owner’s manual” of the priesthood³ and what President Heber J. Grant noted to be one of his most oft-quoted verses in the Doctrine and Covenants:⁴ “No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; by kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile.”⁵

Why are these principles of power and influence included together? What is it about persuasion, long-suffering, meekness, and love, among other virtues, that makes them essential? And how can they be applied in the myriad of social interactions we have as lifelong learners and disciples?

Early in the Book of Mormon, Lehi had a dream in which his family was commanded to obtain critical records on plates of brass. The only problem was that these records were located somewhere other than where the family was, and it meant doing something that several of the sons were not planning on, nor were they enthused about doing—namely, going back. Lacking agreement and after “consult[ing] one with another,” the sons made the decision by chance on who would face Laban, casting lots. Laman was chosen to head back to Jerusalem. He subsequently failed to get the plates and returned to tell his brothers the bad news.⁶

At this point, the brothers were finished, but Nephi was not willing to give up just yet. He gave them a charge that “as the Lord liveth, and as we live, we will not go down unto our father in the wilderness until we have accomplished the thing which the Lord hath commanded us,”⁷ followed by a series of reasons, including the need to be faithful, the context of Jerusalem’s wickedness and its imminent destruction, and the key role of the records for linguistic and spiritual continuity. His plea worked. “And it came to pass that after this manner of language did I persuade my brethren, that they might be faithful in keeping the commandment of God.”⁸

In this case, Nephi persuaded his brothers to do what they should have already understood was the right thing to do—to go and try again to get

the plates. But just like us, they needed to be engaged in a conversation, to be reminded and persuaded. (It is interesting to note that for some reason, the brothers did not have a hard time returning to Jerusalem once more to persuade Ishmael and his daughters to join them in the wilderness.⁹)

Later on we see how their attitude changed when they lost their commitment to their father's vision and escalated to violence, or hard power, against their younger brother. At that point, their choices were mitigated by an angel¹⁰—but Nephi's efforts throughout illustrate the process of persuasion and show how dialogue played an important part in Nephi's relationship to his family and his commitment to truth.

LEARNING AND PERSUASION

Today, we might associate persuasion with something different from Nephi's familial entreaties. Jay Conger, a professor of business at Claremont McKenna, addresses common misunderstandings about persuasion:

Persuasion is widely perceived as a skill reserved for selling products and closing deals. It is also commonly seen as just another form of manipulation—devious and to be avoided. Certainly, persuasion can be used in selling and deal-clinching situations, and it can be misused to manipulate people. But exercised constructively and to its full potential, persuasion supersedes sales and is quite the opposite of deception. *Effective persuasion becomes a negotiating and learning process through which a persuader leads colleagues to a problem's shared solution.* Persuasion does indeed involve moving people to a position they don't currently hold, but not by begging or cajoling. Instead, it involves careful preparation, the proper framing of arguments, the presentation of vivid supporting evidence, and the effort to find the correct emotional match with your audience.¹¹

Indeed, we know persuasion is a theme that cuts across many different academic and professional fields. And in an even larger sense, persuasion is at the core of the learning process because it changes the way we perceive and understand reality, influencing our attitudes and creating our vision of the world.

Learning involves active engagement in introducing, evaluating, and deciding which ideas have merit and which do not. As a proud graduate of this institution, I experienced one of my formative learning experiences in honors courses where Dean Hal Miller took us into a world of new “conversations” where we could engage in a discussion with some of the greatest minds and on important topics in the world of ideas. We wrestled with Plato, plumbed the Bhagavad Gita, pondered St. Augustine, and wrote alongside Montaigne. Our job as students was to read, to question, and to determine what was persuasive and what was not. More often than not, we missed the point—yet Dr. Miller carefully and patiently explained and answered questions as we stumbled along the path of learning.

As Latter-day Saints, our spiritual foundation influences all aspects of our learning, professions, and family life. Also, experiencing give-and-take and intellectual back-and-forth helps us to increase our understanding and ideally make better decisions, as Hugh Nibley explained in a talk given to Pi Sigma Alpha, the political science honor society:

A discussion with God is not a case of agreeing or disagreeing with him—Who is in a position to do that?—but of understanding him. What Abraham and Ezra and Enoch asked was “Why?” Socrates showed that teaching is a dialogue, a discussion. As long as the learner is in the dark, he should protest and argue and question, for that is the best way to bring problems into focus, while the teacher patiently and cheerfully explains, delighted that his pupil has enough interest and understanding to raise questions—the more passionate, the more promising. There is a place for discussion and participation in the government of the kingdom.¹²

But persuasion is merely a tool, and instruments can be used for different moral purposes.¹³ It seems essential that section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants places persuasion in close quarters with at least three qualities previously introduced, namely meekness, long-suffering, and love. These virtues can modify and direct our persuasive efforts, especially as we interact in a world filled with conflict, strife, and disagreement. Let’s consider each virtue separately as we try to understand how they relate to our persuasive efforts.

LONG-SUFFERING

Defined, “long-suffering” means “an enduring disposition” or “having endured mental or physical discomfort for a protracted period of time patiently or without complaint.” It might seem a stretch to our modern world, but if we hope to persuade others, we must listen to their concerns and create a space for others to engage in conversation, just as Nephi did with his siblings.

Orson Scott Card, an LDS author and frequent columnist, recently observed the following:

Even within our country, some Latter-day Saints will strongly disagree with others about the actions of our government. Because I have written extensively on political matters, I have received many letters from Saints who disagree with me, asking, “How can you hold that opinion and still be a faithful Latter-day Saint?” (Of course, some of the letters are not so politely worded.)

I get such letters about equally from the left and the right, and about almost every topic I’ve covered. . . . But the point of freedom is that we should not assume that people who disagree with us are unworthy of full membership in our community, or that their voices should not be heard.

On the contrary, it is essential that all voices be heard in order to reach wise decisions that take into account the needs and judgments of all people.¹⁴

Students are especially adept at and enjoy new opportunities in social media—where an incredibly wide range of viewpoints, ideas, and arguments reside. On occasion I have watched with horror as my Facebook page becomes the staging ground for a battle of opposing views that mirrors many newspaper discussion boards, sports websites, blogs, and anywhere that open (and especially anonymous) interaction is allowed. My students tell me it is appropriate to delete or censor my online “friends,” but I secretly hope my students’ inner angels will help these commenters regain a sense of decorum, if not a measure of kindness.

Henry David Thoreau wrote, “Thaw with his gentle persuasion is more powerful than Thor with his hammer. The one melts, the other but breaks

into pieces.”¹⁵ And yet it seems that some online contributors would rather be Nordic superheroes than a force of nature. That is because the language and tone of many comments online preclude a conversation. Discussions can become less about respecting or enduring other views and more about making our point heard.

These discussion-enders may be insensitive responses, but as part of communities, and especially learning communities, they become deal breakers that replace dialogue with an awkward silence at best and “sharpness” at worst—usually without the “increase of love” we are advised to employ afterward.¹⁶ More importantly, they demonstrate a lack of long-suffering in our demeanor because we do not want to have to listen to something that does not fit our thinking. We recognize not all ideas are equal or even correct—that is why we need to learn. But being long-suffering increases our chances of gaining understanding, and it keeps us connected to those in the discussion.

Clearly, this is a very small part of being long-suffering, as many with greater trials can attest. But this important virtue may give us resolve to find ways to stay connected, to be patient, and to try and better understand others.

MEEKNESS

Meekness is another virtue recommended to us and, like the others, is a subject matter unto itself. We know personal growth occurs best when we submit to God’s will, but as President Ezra Taft Benson taught, “Either we can choose to be humble or we can be compelled.”¹⁷ One way we can immediately experience our limitations is through cross-cultural interactions in our smaller, more globalized world.

Cultural differences are rarely more apparent than when we experience another place firsthand. Several years ago, our family traveled across Europe on a study abroad, and while contending with different food, language, and environments—mostly in large, urban cities—our eight-year-old son, Jack, concluded, “In Turkey, they don’t seem to understand our personal space or our family bubble.” In fact, he and his younger brother were regularly pinched and patted, observed and provoked, and he was not prepared for all of that attention. Buses were crowded—unlike the one

he is used to riding. City streets were filled with a myriad of smells, sights, and sounds that were unfamiliar and frightening at times. And many things seemed so very different—from electric plugs to the experience of worshipping with sixty members of the Church in a city of thirteen million people.

In these instances, we can withdraw, retreat, or become outright defensive. We can also fail to see what is happening before us. But when we approach these new cultural adventures with meekness and humility, we can begin to understand our limitations in new ways. In a letter to Edward Partridge, Joseph Smith wrote: “We ought always to be aware of those prejudices which some-times so strangely present themselves, and are so congenial to human nature, against our friends, neighbors, and brethren of the world, who choose to differ from us in opinion and in matters of faith. Our religion is between us and our God. Their religion is between them and their God.”¹⁸

Elder Neal A. Maxwell, nearly thirty years ago, addressed this topic on BYU campus, noting that “in the ecology of the eternal attributes these cardinal characteristics are inextricably bound up together. Among them, meekness is often the initiator, the facilitator, and the consolidator.” He further explains the link to persuasion this way:

Since God desired to have us become like Himself, He first had to make us free, to learn, to choose, and to experience; hence our humility and teachability are premiere determinants of our progress and our happiness. Agency is essential to perfectibility, and meekness is essential to the wise use of agency—and to our recovery when we have misused our agency. . . .

In contrast, we see in ourselves, brothers and sisters, the unnecessary multiplication of words—not only a lack of clarity, but vanity. Our verbosity is often a cover for insincerity or uncertainty. Meekness, the subtraction of self, reduces the multiplication of words.

Without meekness, the conversational point we insist on making often takes the form of I, that spearlike, vertical pronoun. Meekness, however, is more than self-restraint; it is the presentation of self in a posture of kindness and gentleness. It reflects

certitude, strength, serenity; it reflects a healthy self-esteem and a genuine self-control.¹⁹

LOVE

Finally, a virtue that guides our persuasion efforts is real love. This may well be the hardest part of a gospel approach, because it is so easy for us to become enamored with our own ideas, accomplishments, and interests. It is also quite difficult to love at close range when our family, friends, or colleagues do not appreciate our efforts. And it is harder still when we face down our real or perceived enemies.

Starting in 1999, I attended a number of UN conferences in New York, Nairobi, Geneva, and elsewhere, where I was involved in multipart negotiations with countries and groups that had opposing views on a number of policy issues. This competition of ideas—common to the sports arena, courtroom, marketplace, or among the electorate—often led to zero-sum outcomes through long negotiation. Try as we might to break through and find common ground, discussions were difficult, and both sides were regularly frustrated. Some of these differences were procedural, but I was struck by the degree to which our opposing sides displayed personal animosity and open hostility.

We occasionally had hard-won victories at the expense of the other side. The lack of empathy was readily apparent and in some ways understandable. Since then, I have often thought about these experiences and the possible lessons.

Recently, someone who has been involved in these issues was interviewed. In talking about how to address these types of intractable conflicts, she said that as a result of thinking about them over a long period of time, she recognized the need for and advocated a type of “sportsmanship” that seems to me to be an essential part of a Christian approach in such areas:

The need to approach others with enthusiasm for difference is absolutely critical to any change. You know . . . I’m the toughest of fighters. And you know I love a good fight. And I love to win. But I think what I have learned is that you have got to approach differences with this notion that there is good in the other. And that if we can’t

figure out how to do that and if there isn't the crack in the middle where there are some people on both sides who absolutely refuse to see the other as evil, this is going to continue.²⁰

How do we meekly, patiently, and lovingly engage with others, especially when the stakes are the highest? For me, this gospel ideal of love warrants our serious consideration. President Uchtdorf observed the following:

We must realize that all of God's children wear the same jersey. Our team is the brotherhood of man. This mortal life is our playing field. Our goal is to learn to love God and to extend that same love toward our fellowman. We are here to live according to His law and establish the kingdom of God. We are here to build, uplift, treat fairly, and encourage all of Heavenly Father's children.²¹

There will always be times when we must take a stand for what is right. But I believe we can try to do so in a loving and genuine manner, avoiding ad hominem and mean-spirited attacks. I recognize that possessing love unfeigned is extremely challenging, but I have seen examples throughout my life from my parents, wife, colleagues, and students that give me hope.

CHANGING MINDS AND HEARTS

Recently, filmmaker Sidney Lumet passed away. He was known for a remarkable film titled *12 Angry Men*, which portrays the compelling transformation of divergent viewpoints over a short period of time. In the film, a young man of low social status has been accused of murdering his father. As the title suggests, twelve jurors are chosen to deliberate his fate, and they bring with them lifetimes of experience and pain, as well as their own idiosyncratic perspectives.

The entire 1957 film version takes place in one room and occurs in real time. Initially, it appears to be an open-and-shut trial. But one lone juror, juror number eight, played by Henry Fonda, quietly voices his dissenting opinion. He does so through the first part of the film by listening quietly, thoughtfully assessing each juror's view, and asking probing questions.

As the film progresses, it becomes clear he is beginning to persuade other jurors one by one, but the way in which he does it still surprises

me. Through continued engagement with the others—including the last holdout juror—and a great deal of listening and discussion, juror number eight eventually persuades all eleven to the “not guilty” conclusion.²²

Nationalism is just one obvious aspect of diplomacy. And yet we know of Latter-day Saint diplomats who proudly wear the flags of at least seven countries. Ultimately, as Latter-day Saint professionals, it may be more important how we are persuaded rather than how we persuade. For, while changing our mind is important in learning, the opening of our hearts is critical to our salvation.

May we be better able to engage the wide range of perspectives and discourse as Christians in the broader world around us—and become better citizens, diplomats, and professionals as well.

NOTES

1. Martin Hickman, “Diplomatic Relations,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:383.
2. D&C 121:36.
3. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Your Potential, Your Privilege,” *Ensign*, May 2011, 59.
4. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Heber J. Grant* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2002), 107.
5. D&C 121:41–42.
6. 1 Nephi 3:10–14.
7. 1 Nephi 3:15.
8. 1 Nephi 3:21.
9. See 1 Nephi 7:1–3.
10. See 1 Nephi 3:28–30.
11. Jay Conger, “The Necessary Art of Persuasion,” *Harvard Business Review* (May–June 1998): 86; emphasis added.
12. Hugh Nibley, “Beyond Politics,” *BYU Studies* 15, no. 1 (Autumn 1974): 3–28.
13. See Moroni 7:17.
14. Orson Scott Card, “No Nation Is Devoid of Error,” *Deseret News*, 2 July 2009.
15. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1893), 477.
16. D&C 121:43.
17. Ezra Taft Benson, “Beware of Pride,” *Ensign*, May 1989, 6.

18. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 330–48.
19. Neal A. Maxwell, “Meekly Drenched in Destiny,” *BYU Speeches*, 5 September 1982.
20. “Listening Beyond Life and Choice,” radio interview of Frances Kissling by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, 20 January 2011, <http://www.onbeing.org/program/listening-beyond-life-and-choice/transcript/504>.
21. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Pride and the Priesthood,” *Ensign*, November 2010, 56.
22. *12 Angry Men*, directed by Sidney Lumet (1957; Orion-Nova Productions). Adapted from *Twelve Angry Men*, a teleplay by Reginald Rose (1954; Studio One).