



Every relationship that grows out of learning that is motivated by love, that focuses on worthy content, and that relies on uplifting methods results in an increase of love among learners, between learner and teacher, and between learner and God.

# Learning That Leads to God

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While teaching an instructional design course, I would often begin the semester by asking students to define the word *learning*. On the surface, that seems like a relatively simple task, but most students struggled to craft a definition that satisfied them. We would then explore scholarly definitions of the word, often with equally unsatisfying results. Scholars in the fields of education and psychology usually focus on three primary aspects of the word *learning*: (1) the acquisition of new knowledge or a new skill (2) that persists over time and (3) is not due only to growth and development.<sup>1</sup>

The kind of learning that has eternal consequences and leads to God is so much more than traditional definitions of learning would suggest. At its core, it requires learners to exercise agency and faith—and teachers to help students become agents rather than objects in the learning process. Such sacred learning requires both learners and teachers to act out of love for God. Consequently, it produces powerful relationships between learners and teachers as well as between learners and teachers and God. And while those who engage in sacred learning and teaching in this way are completely dependent on God, they become much less dependent on manuals and earthly teachers.

Above all, such consequential learning is driven by a desire to become closer to God and is focused on that outcome.

The definitions of learning that form the basis of disciplines in education and psychology leave almost no room for the role that agency plays in learning. It is almost as if the definitions assume that the one who teaches is the one who decides what will be learned. However, anyone who has taught for an extended period of time knows that the student's desire to learn holds much more sway than the teacher's desire to teach. Learning demands the exercise of agency—both for the teacher and for the student. The student needs to act on what is being taught, and the teacher needs to make certain that the student's agency is being honored (see 2 Nephi 2:26).

Learning in the gospel sense means more than the acquisition of new knowledge or a new skill, even one that persists over time and is not due only to growth and development. Someone can acquire the skill to lie, steal, or cheat, but we should not call that *learning*—at least in the gospel sense. One who spends time studying evil has, in one sense, relinquished personal agency. Since we know that God gave us the gift of agency, we also know that he did not give us such a gift so that we could will ourselves over to the adversary.<sup>2</sup> He gave us agency so that we could choose to be like him.

This understanding of agency has vast implications for learning because agency is a godly gift—it is the power to develop godliness, to become like the giver of the gift. In this sense, when we exercise our divine gift of agency to learn, we will draw nearer to God. We will not be held captive in the “hidden darkness” that often hovers secretly around us (see 2 Nephi 3:5). Learning that leads to God will lead away from every force that might hold us back, every distraction that would weaken our resolve. This learning will embolden us, lift us, and bring us closer to the Savior.

Does this mean that we refuse to acknowledge the influence of evil in the world—that we pretend that “all is well in Zion” (2 Nephi 28:21)? Of course not. The prophets are keenly aware of the processes and results of moral decay in our world, else how could they warn us against these troubling trends? But their learning and ours must center on progress toward godliness, and therefore we devote our energies to learning that promotes personal growth, worthy achievements, and wholesome relationships—while remaining informed about the human condition in all its complexity.

Elder David A. Bednar has spoken often about the relationship between agency and learning. He has helped us understand that learning in its highest

sense requires the learner to act rather than waiting to be acted upon by a teacher or some other force. Learning is more than the simple acquisition of new knowledge: “Learning by faith cannot be transferred from an instructor to a student through a lecture, a demonstration, or an experiential exercise; rather, a student must exercise faith and act in order to obtain the knowledge for himself or herself.”<sup>3</sup>

When one thinks of the phrase “act and not be acted upon,” the first thing that might come to mind is to avoid being influenced by the adversary—to be acted upon. But Elder Bednar has made it clear on more than one occasion that learners need to avoid being merely acted upon by teachers as well:

I think we often view the teacher as the disseminator of information, and to a degree that’s true. But what that does is make the members of the class objects that are primarily being acted upon, not agents who are acting. And with moral agency when we act as agents, it invites individual teaching by the power of the Holy Ghost in a powerful way. I believe that the highest manifestation of teaching is inviting learners to act in accordance with the truth that they are learning.<sup>4</sup>

The ultimate goal of gospel learning is to increase our capacity and desire to act in ways that lead to all that is good and true. The more we act in these ways, the closer we come to God. Agency, then, gives us the power to learn what we need to learn to one day “see him as he is” because we have chosen to become “like him” (Moroni 7:48).

We know that “whatever principle of intelligence” we acquire in this life will rise with us in the next life. Learning, therefore, is not an incidental pastime during our mortal existence. It is literally the core purpose for which we came to earth. But we know that not every fact or skill we acquire now will be needed in the eternities. The capacities we are developing in our everyday life, however, will be needed.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell explained this principle as follows: “Our intelligence will rise with us, meaning not simply our I.Q., but our capacity to receive and to apply truth. Our talents, attributes, and skills will rise with us, certainly also our capacity to learn, our degree of self-discipline, and our capacity to work.”<sup>5</sup>

## The Teacher’s Role

If learning is the central focus, and if the agency of the learner is the most critical part of the equation, what is the role of the teacher? Let me illustrate

with an experience I had when I was serving with my wife as temple president and matron of the Bismarck North Dakota Temple.

When there were no scheduled sessions in the temple, I spent a significant portion of my time helping African refugees who had come to Bismarck to seek employment. During our first few weeks in our new assignment, the missionaries asked that I help them with their investigators who spoke French. One of these families joined the Church. The husband, Freddie, asked if I would help him prepare for licensure as a certified nursing assistant (CNA).

A teacher is normally expected to be an expert in the subject matter. I had no background in anything related to medical professions. So, in the process of helping Freddie prepare for certification as a nursing assistant, we simultaneously learned the content together.

My experience helping Freddie and his wife, Angel, integrate into American culture reminded me that teachers are first and foremost learners. Whether I am asked to teach someone how to become licensed as a CNA or to teach a lesson on the Godhead in Sunday School to fifteen-year-olds, I must prepare. I must become a learner, a seeker of knowledge. I must place myself in the place of the learner, come to understand the learner's needs, and then learn what I need to learn in order to be of help.

My experience with Freddie and other refugees reminded me of the four aspects of learning that lead to God: motive, content, method, and relationship.

### *Motive*

If we want to draw closer to God, there is ultimately only one motive that should underlie our actions: love. I am speaking of "the pure love of Christ," as Mormon defines it (Moroni 7:47). Freddie's motivation to become a CNA was, at least on the surface, to double his income. Some might conclude that his motive was simply to acquire wealth. But underlying his desire to increase the amount in his monthly paycheck was his desire to provide for his young son and his wife, who was expecting their second child. Prior to their arrival in the US, Freddie and Angel had been driven out of their native country, the DR Congo, to Rwanda to Burundi, and finally to Kenya, where they lived in tents with no running water or electricity.

Freddie's desire to provide for his family was so strong that he enrolled in courses at the local community college while he was working toward certification as a CNA. When he obtained his CNA license, he worked nights so he

could attend school during the day—all the while still struggling to master the English language. Freddie's devotion to his family was evident whenever we met together for our learning sessions. Freddie reminded me of the importance of motives. He was not being acted upon. He was clearly acting out of love for his family to learn what he needed to learn so that he could provide for the most important people in his life—his family.

Freddie's determination grew out of the love he had for his family. One of life's constant challenges is to increase our capacity to love. The greater our capacity to love, the greater our capacity to exercise our agency. This explains why our motives for learning—and for everything else we do in life—are so crucial to our eternal happiness. The more we learn out of love, the greater our power to choose as God wants us to choose.

### *Content*

The aim of gospel learning is clearly to help us draw closer to God. But learning that leads to God can take many forms. The content might be the words of ancient and modern prophets, but it might also be the content that Freddie and I were learning so that he could become a CNA. As J. Reuben Clark Jr., former member of the First Presidency, once said, "He who invades the domain of knowledge must approach it as Moses came to the burning bush. He stands on holy ground; he would acquire things sacred. We must come to this quest of truth—in all regions of human knowledge whatsoever, not only in reverence, but with a spirit of worship."<sup>6</sup>

President Clark helps us understand that truth in all its forms can draw us closer to God. My father had Parkinson's disease for the final twenty-two years of his life. During those years he developed an interest in straw flowers. He would order new varieties of the flowers every year, plant them in his yard, and then hang them upside down to dry from the roof of his garage. Once dried, he cut the stems off and then carefully replaced each stem with a green wire to support the dried bloom. Finally, he would place the blooms, arrange them in small baskets, and then donate or sell them to doctors and dentists who gave them to their patients.

I remember watching him thread the wires into the blooms one evening. His hands began trembling from the Parkinson's disease, and then—what seemed quite miraculous—his hands became steady enough to perform the fine-motor task of piercing the center of the fragile dried bloom with the end

of the green wire—one bloom after another, hour after hour. He called his flower creations Everlasting Beauty.

My father was learning about straw flowers—how to grow, dry, preserve, and arrange them. He was learning about the possibilities and limitations of his own physical body. He was learning about the value of being productive in spite of his disease. In Elder Maxwell's terms, my father was developing his capacity to love, to be patient, and to persevere. His motive, I believe, was love of God and his creations. Reflecting on his final years, I am convinced that my father's learning was leading him closer to God.

### *Method*

Freddie used online self-instructional systems to learn how to become a CNA. My father used seed catalogues and other sources to learn how to become skilled at growing and arranging straw flowers. Methods vary. Some can even lead us away from God. Media, for example, can be powerful tools for learning, but only if we are selective. If a teacher is part of our method, we must also be selective.

When I received the calling to be the Sunday School General President, I soon learned that I would be speaking and teaching in many Spanish-speaking countries. My mission as a young man was in Tahiti, where I learned Tahitian and French, but I had always wanted to learn Spanish. When I was given the assignment to speak at a multistake conference that would be broadcast to Argentina, I thought, "This is my chance to learn Spanish."

One day as I was returning to my office on the BYU campus, I saw the chair of the Spanish and Portuguese Department. I asked if he had a moment to listen to my Spanish. I explained to him that while serving as mission president, I had learned to say the "Missionary Purpose" from *Preach My Gospel* in Spanish, and I was wondering if I should try to give my talk to Argentina in Spanish six weeks later. He listened to my Spanish and then said, "Oh, you must do it. You can do it."

So I began learning. My method? I wrote the talk in English, had it translated, asked a native Spanish speaker to record it, and then began practicing in earnest. I had multiple tutors along the way—one a BYU student from Peru who did all he could to help my pronunciation. Then I saw the department chair again. He offered to come to my office and listen to me as I practiced my talk. I tried in vain to convince him that he did not have time to worry about my Spanish, but he insisted.



He sat across from my desk, closed his eyes so he could concentrate on my pronunciation, and said, “OK, I want to hear you read your talk all the way through.” Periodically he would say, “Wait a minute, say that again, it sounds too much like French” (which I knew much better than Spanish). Feeling relieved, I finally finished my fifteen-minute talk, and he said, “OK, let’s hear it again.” I responded, “You don’t have time for that.” But again, he insisted, and I began again to read my talk—him listening with his eyes closed, giving periodic correction.

When he left my office, I sat there wondering why he would take so much time with someone like me with whom he had only a passing acquaintance. I could only conclude that his motives were completely pure. He had nothing to gain personally, and I had everything to gain. Was he a teacher? A tutor? Or was he simply ministering to one in need of some very specific help that he was uniquely prepared to give? All I knew was that his “method” not only improved my Spanish, but it led me closer to God.

### *Relationships*

Relationships are at the core of learning that leads to God. My relationship with Freddie and Angel continued to become richer and more life-giving from the moment they were baptized through all of our subsequent encounters. My father’s relationships with those who received his flowers likewise became increasingly rewarding. And my relationship with the department chair who helped me with Spanish became more meaningful. In each case, the relationship between the learner and God was the most important of all outcomes.

Moses’s experience with the burning bush resulted in the gift of the Ten Commandments, but the most powerful outcome was his deepened relationship with God. He went to learn what he needed to do as God’s prophet, but he left Mount Sinai with a closeness to God that would ultimately mean more than the words engraved on those stone tablets. The brother of Jared also went to the Lord for specific instruction. He wanted heavenly help to find a way to provide light to the boats, but he was asked to provide his own proposal. He was asked to learn for himself. That learning led him directly to the Lord, and the light that came with his vision had a more far-reaching impact on his people than did the light from the rocks inside the boats.

When Joseph returned from the grove following his vision of God the Father and his Beloved Son, he said to his mother, “I have learned for myself” (Joseph Smith—History 1:20). What had he learned? Far more than he



initially set out to learn. He not only learned that he should join none of the churches in his town, but also learned the true nature of God, and perhaps above all felt the love God had for him as a young man and the complete confidence God had in him that he could usher in the final dispensation of the fulness of times.

Every relationship that grows out of learning that is motivated by love, that focuses on worthy content, and that relies on uplifting methods results in an increase of love among learners, between learner and teacher, and between learner and God. The relationship itself becomes the most important result of the learning. We often view the good relationships that can emerge from the learning process as side effects, or unintended positive consequences of our efforts to learn or to teach. But how we form relationships as we learn—both the relationship between learner and teacher and the relationship of both with God—may be the most important outcome of gospel learning. Those relationships can potentially last long after the class or course ends, lifting and motivating both learner and teacher to keep seeking more knowledge, more understanding, more truth.

If I ask a group of people to reflect on their life and select their most influential teacher—and then I ask them why that particular teacher was the one they selected—they will most commonly say something like the following: “That teacher made me feel like I could do more than I thought I could do. The teacher had so much confidence in me.” Almost no one says, “That teacher was the most knowledgeable one I ever had.” They usually focus, rather, on the personal feelings of worth and ability the teacher gave them—feelings that still influence their approach to life and learning decades later. The relationship they developed with their favorite teacher had a pervasive effect on their life that went well beyond the content of what they were trying to learn.

## Implications

As educators, we are always trying to extend our mastery of the content we are teaching, but content—even scriptural content—does not necessarily lead one closer to God. While serving as an elders quorum president, I remember becoming frustrated during a lesson when two members of the quorum began arguing a doctrinal point.

The teacher was knowledgeable. He was teaching pure doctrine. But the two who were arguing were driving the Spirit from our meeting. I endured the

debate as long as I could and then stood, opened my Book of Mormon and explained that contention had no place in our meeting (see 3 Nephi 11:29).

The content of the lesson was not the problem. The method (arguing) was the problem, and the more obstinate each became in defending his point of view, the more relationships within the quorum were injured.

We cannot judge others' motives, as only God knows our heart. But we can judge our own motives both as learners and teachers. If we prepare to teach out of love for God and for our students, we will be inspired to listen and observe, so that we can say and do those things that will lead learners closer to God.

Rather than perceiving ourselves as content experts, we begin to see ourselves as fellow learners who are trying to progress on the covenant path alongside our students. This view causes us to examine our own motives, to look inside and make certain that we are doing everything we do out of love for God and for our students.

We begin to focus more on the methods our students are using as learners, rather than focusing only on the methods we are using as teachers. Relationships become paramount—our own relationship with the Savior and the relationship that we forge with each student.

Increasing our own power to exercise agency so that we can in turn help our students increase their agentic power becomes our central goal. The new *Come, Follow Me* curriculum for adults and children and the youth curriculum, released in 2012, all emphasize the importance of learners acting for themselves and not being acted upon. Flexibility is a hallmark of the curriculum. Teachers who expect to be told precisely what to teach and how to teach each principle or doctrine are sometimes disappointed to find that their primary goal is not to present information, but rather to instill in their learners the desire and capacity to become diligent, self-directed gospel learners.

Learners who follow the principles in *Come, Follow Me* will become less dependent on teachers, children will become less dependent on parents, and teachers will become less dependent on manuals for direction. Rather, learners, parents, and teachers alike will become more dependent on the Spirit for inspiration to know what to study, how to study it, what to teach, and how to teach it. All will depend more on the Spirit to know which principle of the gospel they should be mastering at a given moment in time and which principle they should be living more fully.

When the *Come, Follow Me* curriculum was introduced for the youth, some would say, “Oh, I see, this curriculum emphasizes more classroom participation and less lecturing by the teacher.” Although this may have been one aspect of the curriculum, it was not the central premise that it was built upon. More important than the amount of participation was the amount of spiritual strengthening that was intended to occur—both for those teachers and class members. The same could be said about the *Come, Follow Me* adult curriculum. Its primary focus is to help learners draw closer to the Lord as they plant the seed of his word in their hearts, nourish it, and act on it.

With the new curriculum, our capacity to learn will increase because we will be exercising our agency in more powerful ways than ever before. Because we are exercising this God-given gift, we will be drawn closer to him and become more like him. Our learning will lead us to the giver of the gift. It will lead us to God.

## Conclusions

Learning is an agentic act that can help us become like God. The more we exercise our agency as we seek all that is good and true, the more God will reveal what we should learn and how we should learn it.

God tutors each of his children because he loves each one infinitely. Likewise, our motive for learning is based on love—love for him and love for others.

The content and skills we seek to master are always aimed at truth. We are not attracted to worldly fads or trends, but we are constantly trying to magnify the talents and gifts God has given us.

The methods we employ in the learning process are as important as the content we seek to master. We do not learn out of pressure, compulsion, competition, or any other method that ignores or suppresses our agency.

As learners and teachers, we concentrate our efforts on the relationships we are forging during the learning process. Strengthening our relationship with God and with others takes precedence over any other learning goal.

As we continue to exercise our agency in new and more profound ways, our desire to learn what God would have us learn increases. This desire is born of the Spirit; it is not something we manufacture ourselves. Learning in the highest sense—the kind of learning we were born to do—is experiencing a change of heart, putting off an old way of thinking or acting and welcoming a new way.<sup>7</sup> Each such change that transpires within us draws us closer

to God, and the closer we draw to him, the greater our desire for even more and greater truths. Once this cycle begins, it gains an energy of its own—a continual thirst for new knowledge and more truth, until one day “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (Moroni 7:48).

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## Notes

1. For an overview of the definitions of the word *learning*, see Connie Malamed’s summary “10 Definitions of Learning,” <http://thelearningcoach.com/learning/10-definitions-learning/>. The remarkable aspect of all of these ten definitions is not their uniqueness but how similar they are.
2. See Paul V. Johnson, “Free to Choose Liberty or Captivity” (BYU devotional, November 6, 2012).
3. David A. Bednar, “Seek Learning by Faith,” *Ensign*, September 2007.
4. See David A. Bednar, “Acting and Not Being Acted Upon” (video by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, September 17, 2012), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_NzcpcombVY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_NzcpcombVY).
5. Neal A. Maxwell, “Grounded, Rooted, Established, and Settled” (BYU devotional, September 15, 1981), 3.
6. J. Reuben Clark Jr., “Charge to President Howard S. McDonald,” *Improvement Era*, January 1946, 14.
7. See Russell T. Osguthorpe, *The Education of the Heart* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 1996).