

# Living a Life in Crescendo

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A couple of months ago, my wife and I attended a concert that featured the orchestra from the high school in our community. Under the direction of a very dedicated and able music teacher, more than one hundred young people combined their talents to produce a program filled with beautiful and inspiring music.

I am not a musician, but I was captivated that night not only by the music itself but also by the very process used to create that music. I cannot read the unique written language of music, so I was fascinated by these young musicians who could. Each one of them took a score of written music, translated the symbols on the page into sound by skillful action on his or her instrument, and wove together those sounds that, in ways I don't entirely understand, evoked feelings and emotions within me.

I have asked those who can read music to explain to me what the written symbols mean. One of those symbols, I have learned, is called the "crescendo." The word comes from Latin and means "to grow or increase." This symbol tells the musician that the volume of the music is to be increased.

I mention all of the foregoing as a preface to a statement that I would like to use today as the central message of my remarks. Using the crescendo as a metaphor, Elder Neal A. Maxwell said in a general conference address, "In case you hadn't noticed it, in the last days, discipleship

is to be lived in crescendo.”<sup>1</sup> And that is the essence of my message today: as disciples of Jesus Christ, our lives should be lived “in crescendo.”

But what does that mean? It obviously has nothing to do with getting louder as you get older. I offer as one possible answer a sentence from our *Administering Appropriately* handbook: “As individuals come unto Heavenly Father through Jesus Christ, they become more like the Savior in knowledge, performance, attitude, and character.”<sup>2</sup>

I would like to emphasize two things from that statement. First, becoming like Christ is the ultimate aim of living a life in crescendo. Second, that statement identifies four specific areas where each of us should be experiencing crescendo or growth. Those four areas are knowledge, performance, attitude, and character.

The scriptures teach that the Savior Himself, as our exemplar, lived a life in crescendo. The scriptures record that “Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man” (Luke 2:52) until He eventually “received a fulness” (D&C 93:13). Speaking of Christ, President Gordon B. Hinckley said, “You will find your greatest example in the Son of God. . . . He was the great paragon of righteousness, the only perfect man ever to walk the earth. His was the wondrous example toward whom each of us might point our lives in our eternal quest for excellence.”<sup>3</sup>

Another example, according to Elder B. H. Roberts, was the Prophet Joseph Smith. Please note that the things Elder Roberts identified as evidence that the Prophet lived a life in crescendo center on these areas of knowledge, performance, attitude, and character.

Elder Roberts wrote: “He lived his life, as I have said elsewhere, *in crescendo*, it grew in intensity and volume as he approached its close. Higher and still higher the inspiration of God directed his thoughts; bolder were his conceptions, and clearer his expositions of them. . . . He grew stronger with each passing day; more impressive in weight of personal character, and charm of manner.”<sup>4</sup>

We are assembled in various locations today not only as disciples of Jesus Christ but also in the common interest that we share as employees and spouses in the Church Educational System. As such, I would like to apply Elder Maxwell’s statement to our particular circumstances. Not only should our lives as disciples be lived in crescendo but also, as religious educators and spouses in CES, we should live careers this way. And what does that mean?

I know what it does not mean. It does not mean we climb through what some may perceive as a hierarchy of CES positions. It does not mean that over time we advance from small, unseen assignments to

large, visible venues. And it has nothing to do with growing name recognition. In fact, it may very well be that the only ones who truly know whether you are living a career in crescendo are you and Heavenly Father. Because so many changes in assignments and administrators occur in the course of a thirty- or forty-year career, chances are that no one else will see the growth that gradually takes place in an employee. So what does it mean to live a career in crescendo? The statement from the *Administering Appropriately* handbook that was referred to earlier applies here as well.

First and foremost for us as religious educators, Christ is the ultimate and perfect standard by which we measure ourselves. Our objective is to become a teacher like Him. As professional educators, we should be good at what we do. I am sorry to say that I have, on more than one occasion, been guilty of pride because of my position as a professional teacher in the Church. For me, the antidote to that pride has always been to compare my teaching efforts to the Savior's. When I have done so, my pride has quickly vanished. His example as a teacher humbles me and reminds me that the sacred privilege of being called a teacher requires far more than employment in CES. Speaking of Christ as our standard, Elder Maxwell said, "He rejoices in our genuine goodness and achievement, but any assessment of where we stand in relation to Him tells us that we do not stand at all! We kneel!"<sup>5</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the statement from the *Administering Appropriately* handbook refers to four specific areas in which I should be growing as a religious educator. Once again, those areas are knowledge, performance, attitude, and character. With those four principles or areas in mind, we should, in private self-evaluation, regularly ask ourselves if our knowledge and wisdom are increasing through study and righteous living. Is my performance as a teacher and as an administrator improving? Is my attitude more Christlike than it has been in the past? Is my character becoming more and more like Christ's?

Now having said all this, I am sure that not one of us would disagree with Elder Maxwell's declaration that we live our lives in crescendo. But giving assent to the idea is, of course, far easier than actually doing it. We all face inclinations and tendencies that stand as obstacles between us and a Christlike life. One of the most difficult obstacles to our growth is recognizing and accepting the need to change—and accepting the pain that often accompanies change. Elder Richard G. Scott said, "To get from where you are to where He wants you to be requires a lot of stretching, and that generally entails discomfort and pain."<sup>6</sup>

It is a temptation in life, and even in a CES career, to find a place where we are comfortable and content. Familiar surroundings, people, tasks, and routines can offer a sense of security and, if we are not careful, can insulate us against change, growth, and diligence. The prophet Nephi warned, “Wo be unto him that is at ease in Zion!” (2 Nephi 28:24). And why is that so? In a general conference address, Elder Russell C. Taylor, a former member of the Seventy, said, “Progress is not created by contented people.”<sup>7</sup> The message seems very clear: being too comfortable, too contented, and too unwilling to accept change—and the pain associated with it—can keep us from living a life in crescendo.

I have encountered another obstacle that has kept me from living my life in crescendo. When presented with a new idea, procedure, methodology, or emphasis, I have caught myself saying something like this: “I have worked hard at trying to be a good teacher and have spent years honing my skills, and what I do in the classroom seems to work. What’s being proposed or asked of me does not fit my teaching style nor my personality. Why would I tamper with or try to fix something that isn’t broken?”

The fallacy of that kind of thinking is exposed by a principle taught by our commissioner of education, Elder Henry B. Eyring. He said:

Years ago, one of the things we taught people we met as missionaries was that they could either progress or fall back spiritually. We told them it was dangerous to think they could stand still. I remember feeling it was true, and yet I wondered why it was so.

Time has taught me. As the forces around us increase in intensity, whatever spiritual strength was once sufficient will not be enough. And whatever growth in spiritual strength we once thought was possible, greater growth will be made available to us. Both the need for spiritual strength and the opportunity to acquire it will increase at rates which we underestimate at our peril.<sup>8</sup>

If I understand correctly, the principle that Elder Eyring was teaching was that which worked in the past will not be sufficient for what we face today. I believe that applies to our teaching as well.

That principle is illustrated in the war chapters of the Book of Mormon, as many of you know and have taught. At one point the Nephites went to battle, having dressed themselves in armor. The approaching enemy had no armor. The account says that these enemies “were exceedingly afraid of the armies of the Nephites because of their armor, notwithstanding their number being so much greater than the Nephites” (Alma 43:21). Not to be outdone, at a future battle this

enemy dressed itself in armor. Captain Moroni anticipated this; he knew that the armor of a previous battle would not suffice for the current conflict. Moroni implemented new strategies and defenses, and as the armored enemy approached, they were astonished to see the Nephites had fortified their cities. The account says: “To their uttermost astonishment, they were prepared for them, in a manner which never had been known among the children of Lehi. . . . [They] were exceedingly astonished at their manner of preparation for war” (Alma 49:8–9).

What we did ten years ago as teachers or as parents to provide adequate armor for our young people may not be sufficient for the battles they are facing today. To be unwilling to change what we do could put our children and students at risk. Elder Marvin J. Ashton, who was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, once said, “The recognition of the need to change has to be a greater force than the luxury of staying the same.”<sup>9</sup> As parents, as teachers, as workers in the kingdom of God in any capacity, we cannot afford “the luxury of staying the same” if we truly want to help our young people survive their battles.

There is yet another significant obstacle that can keep us from growing as we should, both as disciples and as religious educators. I have wrestled with this one for most of my personal and professional life. I have on occasion recognized the need to change something in my life but, more times than not, have hindered the whole process because I wanted the changes to take place my way or in a way I thought best suited me. The Lord has repeatedly used processes to change me that I haven’t liked. And what’s more, He has changed things in and about me that I wished He would have left alone.

The Christian apologist C. S. Lewis wrote:

When I was a child I often had toothache, and I knew that if I went to my mother she would give me something which would deaden the pain for that night and let me get to sleep. But I did not go to my mother—at least, not till the pain became very bad. And the reason I did not go was this. I did not doubt she would give me the aspirin; but I knew she would also do something else. I knew she would take me to the dentist next morning. I could not get what I wanted out of her without getting something more, which I did not want. I wanted immediate relief from pain: but I could not get it without having my teeth set permanently right. And I knew those dentists: I knew they started fiddling about with all sorts of other teeth which had not yet begun to ache. . . .

Now, if I may put it that way, Our Lord is like the dentists. . . . Dozens of people go to Him to be cured of some one particular sin which they are ashamed of . . . or which is obviously spoiling daily life. . . . Well,

He will cure it all right: but He will not stop there. That may be all you asked; but if once you call Him in, He will give you the full treatment.<sup>10</sup>

So what can we do to better pursue living a life in crescendo? Our *Administering Appropriately* handbook devotes an entire chapter to this topic. It is entitled “Develop Divine Potential and Promote Professional Growth” (pages 15–17). I would like to recommend, as a start, that each of us, whether employee or spouse, read or reread this section. As you do so, prayerfully seek inspiration to determine what it is you can do to move forward in your development and growth. I firmly believe that if we are sincere in our asking, the Lord will manifest to each of us how we can further develop our knowledge, performance, attitude, and character.

That chapter in *Administering Appropriately* stresses three important principles: first, that each of us is accountable for our own growth; second, that we should seek help from others in our efforts to grow; and third, that we should report our progress. I would recommend that once you have prayerfully read that chapter, you share your insights and goals with those who can help you implement them: a spouse, a mentor, or a CES colleague or supervisor. The handbook states, “Although CES leaders should regularly provide assistance, leaders and teachers should also take initiative in seeking help by pursuing counsel, training, and feedback.”<sup>11</sup>

Like many others of a certain gender, I often stubbornly avoid asking for directions or guidance, either while traveling on the road or while looking for something in a store. I don’t know if it is pride or some spirit of conquest, but I have wasted a lot of time and energy by not asking for help, and my wife no longer finds this trait amusing. While my stubborn wanderings in a store may not have eternal consequences, such an attitude in other parts of my life could. The scriptures tell us that many snake-bitten Israelites gave up their lives because they wouldn’t even look at the help that was offered (see Numbers 21:5–9; 1 Nephi 17:41; Alma 33:19–20). I wonder how many times I have suffered unnecessarily because I was too stubborn to ask for assistance.

With so much at stake in the lives of those we lead and teach, we do not have the luxury of wasting time and energy by stubbornly refusing to seek counsel and feedback from others. We need help, and we need to ask for it. And greater blessings will be ours if we voluntarily seek out that help rather than having administrators or supervisors mandate it or develop a program to help us do it.

I would like to offer four final thoughts or observations about change and growth.

*There will be flat periods in life; use them well.* First, having counseled us to live in crescendo, Elder Maxwell offered a caution; there will, of necessity, need to be some pauses in our ascent. He taught:

The seeming flat periods of life give us a blessed chance to reflect upon what is past as well as to be readied for some rather stirring climbs ahead. Patience helps us to use, rather than to protest, these seeming flat periods of life, becoming filled with quiet wonder over the past and with anticipation for that which may lie ahead. Instead of grumbling or murmuring, we should be consolidating and reflecting, which would simply not happen if life were an uninterrupted sequence of fantastic scenery, confrontive events, or exhilarating conversation.

We should savor even the seemingly ordinary times, for life cannot be made up of all kettledrums and crashing cymbals. There must be some flutes and violins. Living cannot be all crescendo; there must be some counterpoint.<sup>12</sup>

*Don't be discouraged as you seek for excellence.* My second observation comes from comments made by President Hinckley at a BYU devotional. You will notice that twice he makes reference to finding happiness in the quest for excellence even if we don't experience all the growth we had hoped for. He said:

We will not become perfect in a day or a month or a year. We will not accomplish it in a lifetime, but we can begin now, starting with our more obvious weaknesses and gradually converting them to strengths as we go forward with our lives.

All of us cannot be geniuses, but we can strive for excellence. . . .

The excellence of which you dream may not be attainable in its entirety. But there will be progress as you try. There will be growth. There will be improvement. And there will be much of added happiness. . . .

. . . Reach for the stars. If you touch them, great shall be your reward. If you stumble and fall while reaching upward, you will be happy knowing you have made the effort.<sup>14</sup>

*Look for small changes in things we do often.* My third observation comes from counsel that was given to us several years ago by Elder Eyring at our annual "Evening with a General Authority." He spoke of self-improvement and change and how we can best achieve it. He said, "Most of us have had some experience with self-improvement efforts. My experience has taught me this about how people and organizations improve: the best place to look is for small changes we could make in things we do often. There is power in steadiness and repetition. And if

we can be led by inspiration to choose the right small things to change, consistent obedience will bring great improvement.”<sup>14</sup>

*Be willing to accept new assignments.* And finally, my fourth observation. As I have looked back over my own life and tried to identify the influences that have helped me to grow and change, I trace back many of my best growth periods to a common catalyst: a request by CES to take a new assignment. Those changes have never been easy, and they were often at times that didn’t seem ideal or to places that I didn’t even know existed. But the Lord knew that each one was a perfect fit for me and my family.

I am *not* suggesting that the only way to grow is to frequently change assignments. There may, in fact, be times when a change wouldn’t be the right thing to do. What I am suggesting is this: When an invitation comes from CES to take a new assignment, consider it very prayerfully, and don’t let comfort or the fear of change drive your decision.

Now, in closing I would like to read the counsel given by President Spencer W. Kimball at the conclusion of the April 1979 general conference. It seems very appropriate for what I have tried to say today. He said: “Let us not shrink from the next steps in our spiritual growth, brothers and sisters, by holding back, or side-stepping our fresh opportunities for service to our families and our fellowmen. Let us trust the Lord and take the next steps in our individual lives. He has promised us that he will be our tender tutor, measuring what we are ready for. . . . He will not ask us to bear more than we can bear nor thrust upon us that for which we are not yet ready. But likewise, we must not tarry too long when we are ready to move on.”<sup>15</sup>

I have received my own witness that this is the Lord’s Church. I know that. I also know that the Church Educational System is His as well. His hand is in this work, both globally and locally. May we live with gratitude for the sacred privilege of being instruments that His hands might use. And may we live our lives in crescendo so that, as we sing in one of our hymns, “more used would I be.”<sup>16</sup> **RE**

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## Notes

1. Neal A. Maxwell, in Conference Report, October 1985, 18; or *Ensign*, November 1985, 15.

2. *Administering Appropriately: A Handbook for CES Leaders and Teachers* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 15.

3. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Quest for Excellence,” in *Brigham Young University 1998–99 Speeches* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1999), 70–71.

4. B. H. Roberts, introduction to *The History of the Church of Jesus Christ of*

*Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 6:xliv.

5. Neal A. Maxwell, in Conference Report, October 1981, 9; or *Ensign*, November 1981, 8.

6. Richard G. Scott, in Conference Report, September–October 1995, 18; or *Ensign*, November 1995, 16–17.

7. Russell C. Taylor, in Conference Report, October 1984, 29; or *Ensign*, November 1984, 23.

8. Henry B. Eyring, “Always,” *Ensign*, October 1999, 9.

9. Marvin J. Ashton, in Conference Report, October 1979, 89; or *Ensign*, November 1979, 62.

10. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1952), 201–2.

11. *Administering Appropriately*, 16.

12. Neal A. Maxwell, *Notwithstanding My Weakness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 65.

13. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Quest for Excellence,” in *Brigham Young University 1998–99 Speeches* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1999), 71.

14. Henry B. Eyring, in “The Lord Will Multiply the Harvest,” a satellite broadcast by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, February 6, 1998.

15. Spencer W. Kimball, in Conference Report, March–April 1979, 114–15; or *Ensign*, May 1979, 82.

16. “More Holiness Give Me,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 131.