

Gratitude

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Some years ago I attended a priesthood training session led by Elder Dallin Oakes. He recommended that, when speaking to the Saints, we start with gospel principles then map those principles into behaviors for righteous living. That is my purpose today. I hope to lay out an argument, a chain of gospel logic, and see if it leads you to a particular principle, as it did me. I invoke the blessings of the Spirit on this conversation, that together we can get deeper insights and find spiritual edification.

Psychologists talk about a mental construct that they call “frames.” A frame represents the set of assumptions and perceptions that a person uses to interpret the events of daily life. Everything we hear, see, experience or feel comes to us through our frames. They shape and modify every aspect of our life experience. The same is true for everything that goes out from us, targeted toward others.

Our frames accrete and evolve over time. That is one reason why human interactions are sometimes so chaotic. I speak using my set of frames, which make intuitive sense to me; but you hear my words through your own personal set, which may be very different from mine. As a result, you could take meaning from my words that are quite different from the meaning I meant to convey, for good or bad. That could be one reason why it’s very good to have the Holy Ghost as a constant companion – that Spirit can increase the precision of such translations.

Usually the frames that define our lives function below the level of conscious thought. We hardly know they’re there, let alone that they are constantly shaping our experience of life and our judgments of those around us. Psychologist George Kelly wrote a classic text called *A Theory of Personality*. In it, he points out that we can consciously recognize, evaluate, and modify the frames we use – he calls them “personal constructs” – to interpret and interact with the outside world.

His main point is this: Whether we do it consciously or unconsciously, the frames we use determine how we experience our lives. Thus we do daily build the world within which we will live. Our referential frames can make our life a thing of miracles, filled with vibrant creativity, beauty, and joy; or they can shape the same experiences in shades of gray, building prison walls of disappointment and pain.

The philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said it this way:

“I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. I possess tremendous power to make life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. ... If we treat people as they are, we make them worse. If we treat people as they ought to be, we help them become what they are capable of becoming.”

Dr. Wallace Goddard extends that concept: “How do we humans attempt to wrestle this muddle of experiences into something that makes sense,” he asks. “How do we give meaning to the events of our lives?”

“We create stories. We take all those experiences and we form them into narratives—our own interpretation of what has happened to us. Some stories are overflowing with joy—perhaps the story of how we fell in love with our spouses or the evolution of treasured family traditions. Some stories are packed with pain—perhaps how we were hurt by someone we trusted ... a time when someone cheated us, <or suffering through debilitating physical challenges.>

“Once we create our stories, we file them in our memories. They become the versions of events that we retell to ourselves and others until we consider them to be accurate and truthful representations of our life experiences. We forget that <our internal narrator always speaks with our own voice; that> we have based our stories on our own interpretation of our experiences. ... we fail to recognize that our interpretations, <our internal frames,> determine both the content and the morals of our stories.

“We can choose to see ourselves as victims in life, or we can chose a different theme for our life story, such as the growth we have achieved in overcoming challenges, or the tender mercies we have been granted.

Wallace describes a couple he knew. They were ... “married in the temple, delighted that their family would be bound together for eternity. It seemed to everyone that they were deeply in love. She told everyone how happy she was. <But> ... years later she announced to her husband that she no longer wanted to be married to him. She told him that as she looked back, she concluded she was never really happy. There hadn’t been any incidences of infidelity or abuse on his part—just the usual irritations and chafing that occurs in marriages. But she decided that she had never been satisfied in the relationship from the beginning. Now that she was ‘seeing more clearly’ she felt she had no other option than leaving the marriage.

Wallace observes that “Perhaps she was a far better actress than any of us knew ... and the good relationship that we witnessed for many years wasn’t real. But I strongly suspect it is more likely that she had re-written her life story to excuse her desire to leave the marriage. Many times we will re-write and edit our memories to justify current feelings or behavior.

“What if that woman had edited her life story differently? What if she had gone back and remembered how they fell in love, the joyful times of their marriage and times when they had overcome challenges together? What if she had considered the story of their relationship ... <through a different set of frames, that held> themes of compassion, forgiveness and commitment? Perhaps she might have remembered many reasons to stay. Perhaps their marriage might have been saved and even thrived.”

Said another way, what we see in the world depends on what we hold in our hearts. Christ said the same: “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Matthew 12:34). He then extended that into a commandment: “... let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly” (D&C 121:45). He understood that the mental frames we use will determine our experience of life. He invites us to build and use frames that actively look for goodness. The Apostle Paul said that “Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure” (Titus 1:15). If our souls are judgmental and angry, then our thoughts are cynical and negative. We see badness. If our hearts are pure, we see goodness in all the world and all those around us. We choose to dwell on their virtues, strengths, and righteousness.

Within this framework, life’s burdens and trials, even the true suffering we must sometimes bear, takes on a very different meaning. “Trials and tribulations are mandatory — but misery is optional.” (Anonymous)

When someone changes their referential frames, it doesn’t just change their life going forward. It also changes their past. Think of a new convert to the Church, and how that changes not just their future, but their understanding of their past, the path that brought them to the Savior. C.S. Lewis, in *The Great Divorce*, said it this way:

“Son, ye cannot in your present state understand eternity ... That is what mortals misunderstand. They say of some temporal suffering, ‘No future bliss can make up for it,’ not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory. And of some sinful pleasure they say ‘Let me have but this and I’ll take the consequences,’ little dreaming how damnation will spread back ... into their past, and contaminate the pleasure of the sin. Both processes begin even before death. The good man’s past begins to change so that his forgiven sins and remembered sorrows take on the quality of Heaven; the bad man’s past already conforms to his badness and is filled only with dreariness. And that is why...the Blessed will say ‘We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven,’ and the Lost, ‘We were always in Hell.’ And both will speak truly.”

<for future reference: add in Alma’s experience as a slave of Amulon and the Lamanites, Mosiah 18&24>

Goddard again: “It isn’t our circumstances that determine the story we tell ourselves about our life—it’s our perspective.”

Perspective ... that word gives a deeper meaning to our conversation.

I went to lunch with my brother and his wife a few days ago. They have a large family, now mostly grown. While all but one of the kids are out on their own, the family gathers together regularly. He described a method that he and his wife still use, as parents, to help their children handle the squabbles that come up from time to time.

“Imagine that you’re looking at this a week from now,” he suggests. “Would it look any different to you then?”

How about if you looked back in 6 months? A year? 10 years? 10,000 years?

That’s what it means to be a child of God, who will exist forever. That framing could hugely change your perspective, couldn’t it?

I believe that that is the exact approach that God our Father routinely employs. He sees us across the eternities, not just in the moment.

You have undoubtedly encountered the old motif that casts our lives, here on earth, as the second act in a three-act play. In this the second act, we capture only a few surface details. We observe those around us, but truly understand but a fraction of their histories and inner workings, even for those we know best. We can’t remember the first act, where God prepared us in the premortal world. As for the third and final act, “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither has entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9). We do not – and, by our own powers, cannot – comprehend God’s amazing doings. Our view is severely limited.

A good friend, Dr. Bob Stephenson, gave me a humorous example drawn from a Woody Allen movie, *Play It Again Sam*.

The set up: Woody sees a young woman in an art museum. Immediately attracted to her, he walks up and tries to engage in conversation.

Allen: That’s quite a lovely Jackson Pollock, isn’t it?

Girl: Yes, it is.

Allen: What does it say to you?

Girl: It restates the negativeness of the universe. The hideous lonely emptiness of existence. Nothingness. The predicament of Man forced to live in a barren, Godless eternity like a tiny flame flickering in an immense void with nothing but waste, horror and degradation, forming a useless bleak straitjacket in a black absurd cosmos.

Allen: What are you doing Saturday night?

Girl: Committing suicide.

Allen: What about Friday night?

Allen here carries the idea of referential frames to the laughable absurd. But many people feel exactly this hopelessness. This poor guy is just trying to get a date, to meet an acutely felt human need, to connect with another soul, hoping perhaps to find someone with whom to share a life. That hope comes crashing up against a wall of misery and despair.

Contrast this to the extraordinary optimism we gain from the gospel's Great Plan of Happiness. The Apostle Paul said if that plan, effectuated through Christ's atonement, was not real, then "we are of all people most miserable" (1 Corin 15:19). But if we have faith in the Savior, and thus trust its truth, we of all people should be the most happy and optimistic.

George MacDonald extended that concept in a way that I find quite compelling:

"Even if there be no hereafter," he said, "I would <rather> live my time believing in a grand thing that ought to be true, <even> if it is not. And if these be not truths, then is the loftiest part of our nature a waste. Let me hold by the better than the actual, and fall into nothingness off the same precipice with Jesus and Paul and a thousand more, who were lovely in their lives, and with their death make even the nothingness into which they have passed like the garden of the Lord. I will go further, and say I would rather die forevermore, believing as Jesus believed, than live forevermore believing as those who deny him."

And that's the point: My purpose in preparing these remarks was to address the principle of gratitude.

The Lord's command that we "receive all things with thankfulness" now makes perfect sense (D&C 78:19). "Thou shalt thank the Lord thy God in all things ... And in nothing doth man offend God, or against none is his wrath kindled, save those who confess not his hand in all things" (D&C 59:7,21). If we accept the atonement of Christ and the Great Plan of Happiness, then we should find purpose in and feel gratitude for every detail of our daily lives. We know that "all things which are good cometh of God" (Moro 7:12). We know that, in God's economy, every hurt will be repaired and every loss restored.

Complaints, whining, fault-finding, and unfounded worry are the opposites of gratitude. They demonstrate that we do not have faith in the promises that God has made to us. We are saying that our plan for our lives is better than God's plan for our lives.

According to Dr. Vaughn Worthen, a practitioner in the emerging field of positive psychology, "Gratitude is a positive experience that comes from recognizing gifts or blessings and feeling thankful. It is also an attitude, a way of perceiving life. ... Gratitude is a habit that can be cultivated ... it is a coping response to challenging or difficult circumstances. Gratitude can have a profound effect ... completely determining

or altering the way we look at an experience.” He uses the principle of gratitude to successfully treat depression, reduce anxiety, and introduce a more positive focus to troubled relationships.

Perhaps the best non-gospel book on how one might create a joyous, productive life is Martin Seligman's *Authentic Happiness*. His secular science fits beautifully with the Lord's counsel on the subject. He shows that the surest way to be happy is to have a life filled with (1) noticing blessings, (2) using and expanding our talents, and (3) finding ways to serve others.

Van Wyck Brooks observed (1948): “How delightful is the company of generous people, who overlook trifles and keep their minds instinctively fixed on whatever is good and positive in the world about them. People of small caliber are always carping. They are bent on showing their own superiority, their knowledge or prowess or good breeding. But magnanimous people have no vanity, they have no jealousy, and they feed on the true and the solid wherever they find it. And, what is more, they find it everywhere.”

To go back to where we started, George Kelly says that ordinary human beings can understand, then modify, the frames that define our experience of life. When we do, our lives become anything but ordinary. It is within our power to create lives of surpassing meaning and beauty. An attitude of gratitude lies at the heart of that transformation. We can learn to see, then practice, and habituate thankfulness in our every response. We can teach ourselves to thrill in the beauty of a sunrise, in the clouds over the mountains, in a sunset over the sea, in the food we eat, in a drink of cold water, in a breath of air, in life itself ... a few of the gifts God sends us daily. We can learn to see God in every person with whom we interact – the good in their souls – even for those closest to us, when they are at their most annoying. We can find and appreciate the growth, and strength, hidden in every trial, every burden. We can learn to love as Jesus loved, and find the joy that only selfless service can bring.

May we all, through our faith, find the joy the gospel brings to every moment of every day.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

“When an elderly woman was asked at her fiftieth wedding anniversary what the secret of her long and happy marriage was, she responded that she had decided at their marriage to forgive her husband ten faults for the sake of their marriage. "I never got around to listing the ten but every time he did something that made me mad I thought, 'It's a good thing for him that that is one of the ten.'”

G. K. Chesterton, the remarkable English writer suggested: “How much larger your life would be if your self could become smaller in it; if you could really look at other men [and women] with common curiosity and pleasure. ... You would break out of this tiny and tawdry theatre in which your own little plot is always being played, and you would find yourself under a freer sky, and in a street full of splendid strangers.” (G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Image Books, 1959, pp. 20–21.)

Sir William Osler: “Consume your own smoke”

Let all Latter-day Saints learn that the weaknesses of their brethren are not sins. When men or women undesignedly commit a wrong, do not attribute that to them as a sin. Let us learn to be compassionate one with another; let mercy and kindness soften every angry and fretful temper, that we may become long-suffering and beneficial in all our communications one with another. (*Discourses of Brigham Young*, p.273)

The Christian writer, Frederick Buechner, makes keen observations about anger: Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back--in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you. (*Wishful Thinking*, 1973, p.2, Harper & Row)

The best new research on marriage makes the same point. John Gottman lists some of the skills that make a marriage strong and joyful:

- Editing – some things don’t need to be said
- More positives – kindness
- Self-soothing – gentleness
- Value the relationship more than being right – "repair attempts"

There is no place in scripture where the Lord commands us to catalogue our partner’s failures and offenses. Nowhere does the Lord direct us to try to “fix” our partner. He instead commands charity, the pure love of Christ that transcends ordinary definitions of love. It is not surprising that research is coming to recommend kindness as the essential ingredient of healthy family relationships. The Lord and His servants have always recommended kindness, patience, and love. Joseph F. Smith counseled:

We all have our weaknesses and failings. Sometimes the husband sees a failing in his wife, and he upbraids her with it. Sometimes the wife feels that her husband has not done just the right thing, and she upbraids him. What good does it do? Is not forgiveness better? Is not charity better? Is not love better? Isn’t it better not to speak of faults, not to magnify weaknesses by iterating and reiterating them? Isn’t that better? . . . Is it not better to drop [faults] and say nothing about them—bury them and speak only of the good that you know and feel, one for another, and thus bury each other’s faults and not magnify them; isn’t that better? (pp.180-81)

Thomas Clayton Wolfe effectively described the human tendency to choose misery:

Poor, dismal, ugly, sterile, shabby little man...with your scrabble of harsh oaths...Joy, glory, and magnificence were here for you...but you scrabbled along...rattling a few stale words... and would have none of them.

Story of the room full of horse manure and the girl – when asked why she’s digging through the poop, she replies: “With this much horse manure, there must be a pony in here somewhere.”