

This is a Test. It is Only a Test

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My mother made me take piano lessons. And because I am her eldest and she had not yet been worn down by the thankless task of prodding five children to practice every day, my whining about hating to practice fell on deaf ears. The fact that I eventually studied piano for fifteen years is largely a tribute to Mother's resilience. I wish I had a dollar for every time she prophesied that I would thank her one day for all of the musical torture. As always, she was right. I have thanked her, again and again, for that introduction to the keyboard, because somewhere between those first bars of "Here we go, up a row, to a birthday party" and "Rhapsody in Blue," I fell in love with music, especially classical music, which in its more magnificent passages made my heart feel like it was going to leap out of my chest—in other words, it made my young spirit soar.

Here, again, Mother deserves all the credit. I couldn't have been more than ten or eleven when she gave me a stack of classical albums, introducing me to some of the great composers whose works were characterized by dramatic musical passages and what I call the Big Finish.

I would lie in front of the stereo for hours, listening to the third movement of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto or his "Prelude in C# Minor," all the while imagining myself at a shiny black concert grand in Carnegie Hall. I pictured my debut there, standing ovation and all. I imagined that I would be humble but brilliant—brilliant enough to move an entire audience, including Mother, to tears. Somewhere in all of my daydreaming, I caught a vision of how it would feel to play so beautifully that others' hearts would soar.

At that point, Mother no longer had to encourage me to practice. Once I had a vision of the possibilities, the motivation to master the piano came from inside. Am I saying that practicing suddenly was enjoyable? Absolutely not! It was often sheer drudgery. But I found a technique that helped me endure those tedious hours of practice, day in and day out. When I set out to tackle a new piece, I would master and memorize the Big Finish first, all the while visualizing myself in concert, where the audience jumped to its feet at the last chord. Imagining how grand the Big Finish would be kept me going through months of rehearsal on technical passages that didn't provide nearly the same sense of drama but that had to be mastered nonetheless.

In short, my progress on the piano and my motivation to practice increased dramatically when *I* caught a vision of my potential.

We are temporarily afflicted with the amnesia of mortality. But just as my spirit was stirred by the majesty of those dramatic musical passages and the possibility of performing them flawlessly, through the power of the Spirit we can often "catch a spark," as Joseph F. Smith taught us, "from the awakened memories of the immortal soul, which lights up our whole being as with the glory of our former home" (*Gospel Doctrine* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939], 13-14). It is the Spirit that will also shed light upon our ultimate potential—the grandest finish of all.

If, on the other hand, we are not able to catch a vision of the Big Finish, meaning a clear image of who we are and what we are becoming—how can we be willing to practice? Life, like classical music, is full of the difficult passages that are conquered as much through endurance and determination as through any particular skill.

Remember the announcements that used to interrupt your regularly scheduled television programming? "This is a test of the emergency broadcasting system. It is only a test. If this were a real emergency, you would be notified through this station." You've probably seen the poster that reads, "Life is a test. It is only a test. Had this been a real life, you would have been instructed where to go and what to do." It reminds me of a greeting card a friend gave me that shows a frazzled woman who says, "Mother told me there would be days like this . . . But she failed to mention they could go on for months at a time."

There are times when days feel like months and when life feels like the test that it is, days when the vision and hope of a Big Finish are dimmed by immediate demands, days when one might wish for a mortal exam that was a little more manageable.

For indeed, this life *is* a test. It is only a test—meaning, that's *all* it is. Nothing more, but nothing less. It is a test of many things—of our convictions and priorities, our faith and our faithfulness, our patience and our resilience, and in the end, our ultimate desires. In the long run, as Alma taught, whatever we truly desire, we will have. "I know that [God] granteth unto men according to their desire . . . ; yea, I know that he allotteth unto men . . . according to their wills, whether they be unto salvation or unto destruction" (Alma 29:4).

Thankfully, our experience here is an open-book test. We know why we're here, and we have from prophets ancient and modern an extensive set of instructions that never become passé or grown outdated.

Yes, life *is* a test—of many things. But at the risk of sounding simplistic, may I suggest that the mortal experience is largely about vision—our vision of ourselves and our ultimate Big Finish. And vision is determined by faith. The firmer our faith in Jesus Christ, the clearer our vision of ourselves and what we can ultimately achieve and become.

The adversary, of course, is intent on obstructing our vision and undermining our faith. He will do anything and everything to confuse us about who we are and where we're

going because he has already forfeited his privilege of going there.

A vision of our potential is central to survival—both spiritually and physically. I've always been curious about Lehi and his family. Just imagine the family home evening when he informed his wife and children that the Lord had directed them to pack a few belongings and foray into the wilderness, leaving behind their life of comfort. I doubt any of them were enthusiastic about the news. Can't you just imagine the dialogue?

"You want us to do what? To pack a few things and leave home?"

"Yes, that is what the Lord has asked us to do."

"Where are we going?"

"I'm not entirely sure. I know only that we must leave Jerusalem. And by the way, we'll need to travel light. So leave most of your things here."

"When will we come back home?"

"That isn't entirely clear. Perhaps never."

We know how Laman and Lemuel responded—initially and in perpetuity. Why didn't Nephi, their younger (and presumably less mature) brother, react the same way? He probably wasn't thrilled with his father's news, either.

The difference is a classic demonstration of the power of vision. While Laman and Lemuel rebelled, Nephi asked the Lord if he might see what his father had seen. He had the faith to seek his own vision. "I Nephi, . . . did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father; wherefore, I did not rebel against him like unto my brothers" (1 Nephi 2:16). That vision, or sense of purpose, sustained Nephi through a life of trial and tribulation. It helped him pass the test, so to speak.

Joseph Smith was persecuted from the time he announced that he had seen the Father and the Son until he died a martyr. How did he do it? Let us never forget that his prophetic mission began with a vision. "I have actually seen a vision; and who am I that I can withstand God, or why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen? For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it; at least I knew that by so doing I would offend God, and come under condemnation" (Joseph Smith—History 1:25).

"Where there is no vision, the people perish," Solomon proclaimed (Proverbs 29:18).

And perhaps nothing is more vital today than having a vision, manifest by the Spirit, of who we are and what we can become, of our intrinsic value to the Lord, and of the unparalleled role we must play in these latter days. We are literally the offspring of God, his

begotten sons and daughters, with the potential of exaltation (Acts 17:29; D&C 76:24). "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:16-17).

But how do *we* get a clear vision of who we are? How do we gain an eternal perspective compelling enough to move us to action and to govern our choices and priorities? From whence cometh the vision?

I'm sensitive to the issue of vision at the moment, because I'm going through that midlife eye crisis where I can't seem to hold things far enough away for me to read them. Because of my changing eyesight, I find myself turning on lights and lamps everywhere.

Light is a key to vision! And Jesus Christ is the ultimate Light, the "light which shineth in darkness" (D&C 6:21), the light which chases "darkness from among [us]" (D&C 50:25). Faith in Jesus Christ is the key to vision, to seeing ourselves as the Lord sees us. So to improve our vision, we must increase our faith in and connection to the Savior.

It is no accident that faith—not only *believing in* Jesus Christ but *believing him*—is the first principle of the gospel. President Gordon B. Hinckley has said that "of all our needs, I think the greatest is an increase in faith" (*Ensign*, November 1987, 54.)

"Blessed art thou, Nephi," the son of Lehi was told, "because thou believest in the Son of the most high God" (1 Nephi 11:6.) In Alma's brilliant discourse we are told, "If ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of my words" (Alma 32:27).

Can't you just hear the Savior saying, "If you only *want* to believe that I will do for you what I have said I will do, will you experiment? Try me. Put me to the test."

As Lehi and his family learned, their Liahona worked according to their faith in God (Alma 37:40). When they became slothful in their devotions and ceased to exercise faith, the marvelous works ceased. This is in keeping with divine law, for, as Elder James E. Talmage taught, "Faith is of itself a principle of power; and by its presence or absence, . . . even the Lord was and is influenced, and in great measure controlled, in the bestowal or withholding of blessings" (*Jesus the Christ* [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1949], 318). Therefore, let us not "*be slothful because of the easiness of the way. . . . The way is prepared, and if we will look we may live forever*" (Alma 37:46).

Looking. Seeing. Seeking our own vision.

We sometimes tend to define unbelievers as apostates or agnostics. But perhaps that definition is far too narrow. What about those of us who have received a witness of the divinity of the Savior and yet deep in our hearts don't believe he will come through for us? We believe he'll do it for others—for President Hinckley, the Quorum of the Twelve, the

stake Relief Society president—but not for us.

Have you ever carefully selected a gift for someone only to present the gift and have it fall flat? Perhaps a simple "Thanks" feels nonchalant and even ungrateful. Similarly, it must be disappointing to the Lord, who offered the ultimate sacrifice, when we by our unbelief essentially refuse his gift and therefore his offer of help.

Not long ago a friend who is a respected gospel scholar told me about a fireside he had given on the power of the Atonement. Two sisters came up to him afterwards and said, "What you have taught is great, but frankly it sounds too good to be true."

The Lord's gift to us *is* too good to be true—which makes a tepid reaction to that gift all the more regrettable. More than once Nephi chastened his older brothers for their unbelief: "How is it that ye have forgotten that the Lord is able to do all things according to his will, for the children of men, if it so be that they exercise faith in him?" (1 Nephi 7:12).

How indeed? It is a question we might ask ourselves. The Lord *can* do all things. But it is our faith in him, even our willingness to believe, that activates the power of the Atonement in our lives. "We are made alive in Christ because of our faith" (2 Nephi 25:25). I love Nephi's words when he tells his brothers, speaking of the Lord, "And he loveth those who will have him to be their God" (1 Nephi 17:40). Or in other words, those who accept him and his gift.

One would think it would be easy to embrace and have faith in the gift of the Atonement. But I fear that some LDS women know just enough about the gospel to feel guilty that they are not measuring up to some undefinable standard but not enough about the Atonement to feel the peace and strength it affords us. It was Elder Bruce R. McConkie who said that too often the best-kept secret in the Church is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps some of us don't know how to draw the power of the Atonement into our lives; others aren't willing to seek its blessings. And some don't ask because they don't feel worthy. It's quite the irony—that the gospel of the great Jehovah, which contains the power to save every human being and to strengthen every soul, is sometimes interpreted in such a way that feelings of inadequacy result.

Do you remember the exchange in the animated classic *The Lion King* between the deceased King Mufasa and his lion cub, Simba, who turns to riotous living after his father's death? Simba sees his father in a vision, and when he attempts to justify his aimless lifestyle, his father teaches him a divine truth: "You have forgotten who you are because you have forgotten me." As Truman Madsen has said, "The cruelest thing you can do to a human being is to make him forget that he or she is the son or daughter of a king." There is a direct relationship between our personal experience with the Lord and how we see ourselves. The closer we grow to him, the more clear and complete becomes our vision of who we are and what we can become.

I have tender feelings about the connection between our faith in the Lord and the way we see ourselves, because I have spent much of my life struggling to feel that I

measured up. Growing up, I was painfully shy. The phrase "social reject" comes to mind. To make matters worse, I hit 5'10" in the sixth grade. Five-foot-ten is not a popular height for a sixth-grade girl. I was a Mormon in a very non-Mormon community. The fact that I had a great jump shot didn't translate well socially. The guys were my best friends—but not my dates. And I was a farm girl. Though our little town had all of four thousand residents, there was a clear social distinction between the town kids and the country kids. I laugh about this now. But it wasn't very funny then. There was nothing cool about being a tall, sturdy (as Grandma used to call me), Mormon farm girl. I couldn't do what my friends did or go where they went. I was different, and for a teenager, different is deadly.

The summer after my sophomore year I had an experience that convinced me I was destined to a life of mediocrity. Our small MIA went to BYU Education Week, and one of the classes I attended was on the dreaded topic of self-esteem. One day, mid-lecture, the presenter suddenly pointed at me and asked me to stand and introduce myself. I could manage nothing more than to mumble my name and slump back down in my chair. It was pathetic.

I had obviously not demonstrated what the speaker was hoping for, so she pointed to another young woman in the audience—a tall, thin girl with beautiful long hair. Poise oozed out of her cells as she stood and introduced herself, concluding with a gracious word of thanks to the speaker for her marvelous presentation. All the while I was thinking, "Oh, sit down. She didn't ask for a eulogy." But the comparison between the two of us wasn't lost on me. The lecturer only made things worse when she said, "It seems that the young girl from Kansas doesn't feel as good about herself as the girl from Salt Lake City."

I can still picture myself in the back seat of our car as we drove home to Kansas. In between little bursts of tears, I contemplated the future, and things didn't look promising. I didn't measure up, and I feared that I never would. Now I don't want to overstate things. I had great experiences growing up, and I had disappointing experiences. Just like you. But I suffered with a deep feeling of inadequacy.

My insecurities followed me to college here at the Y, and as a result I suffered socially, scholastically, and spiritually. When, during graduate school, a friendship ended in a disappointing way, I hopped in my little Toyota and drove home for a few days of consolation. For a week I moped around the house feeling sorry for myself. Then one afternoon I walked down to my brother's room and noticed his journal on his nightstand. Brad was thirteen, and I thought it might be fun to see what pearls of wisdom he had written. The entries were predictable—about sports and girls and motorcycles. But then I came to the entry he had made the day I arrived home unexpectedly from BYU: "Sheri came home from BYU today. I'm so glad she's home. But she doesn't seem very happy. I wish there was something I could do to help her, because I really love her."

As you can imagine, the tears began to flow. But the sweet emotions unleashed by my brother's words triggered an even more powerful sensation, for almost instantly I had a profound feeling of divine love and acceptance wash over me and, simultaneously, a very clear impression that I ought to quit focusing on everything I didn't have, because I had

enough, and start doing something with what I did have.

For me, it was a profound moment. I didn't pop up and suddenly feel confident about life, but I couldn't deny that the Spirit had spoken and that the Lord loved me and felt I had something to contribute. It was the beginning of seeing myself with new eyes.

Now let's fast-forward a decade to my early thirties when I faced a personal disappointment that broke my heart. From a point of view distorted by emotional pain, I couldn't believe that anything or anyone could take away the loneliness or that I would ever feel whole or happy again. In an effort to find peace, comfort, and strength, I turned to the Lord in a way I had not before. The scriptures became a lifeline, filled as they were with promises I had never noticed in quite the same way—that he would heal my broken heart and take away my pain, that he would succor, or run to, me and deliver me from disappointment.

Fasting and prayer took on new intensity, and the temple became a place of refuge and revelation. What I learned was not only that the Lord could help me but that he would. Me. A regular, farm-grown member of the Church with no fancy titles or spectacular callings. It was during that agonizing period that I began to discover how magnificent, penetrating, and personal the power of the Atonement is.

I pleaded with the Lord to change my circumstances, because I knew I could never be happy until he did. Instead, he changed my heart. I asked him to take away my burden, but he strengthened me so that I could bear my burdens with ease (Mosiah 24:15). I had always been a believer, but I'm not sure I had understood what, or who, it was I believed in.

President George Q. Cannon described what I experienced: "When we went forth into the waters of baptism and covenanted with our Father in Heaven to serve Him and keep His commandments, He bound Himself also by covenant to us that He would never desert us, never leave us to ourselves, never forget us, that in the midst of trials and hardships, when everything was arrayed against us, He would be near unto us and would sustain us. That was His covenant" (*Gospel Truth*, sel. Jerreld L. Newquist, 2 vols. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974], 2:170).

And it all begins with the willingness to believe. "For if there be no faith among the children of men God can do no miracle among them" (Ether 12:12).

Do you believe that the Savior will really do for *you* what he has said he will do? That he can ease the sting of loneliness and enable you to deal with that haunting sense of inadequacy? That he will help you forgive? That he can fill you with optimism and hope? That he will help you resist your greatest temptation and tame your most annoying weakness? That he will respond to your deepest longing? That he is the only source of comfort, strength, direction, and peace that will not change, will not betray you, and will never let you down?

An unwillingness to believe that the Savior stands ready to deliver us from our

difficulties is tantamount to refusing the gift. It is tragic when we refuse to turn to him who paid the ultimate price and to let him lift us up. *Life is a test*. But divine assistance is available to help us successfully complete this most critical examination.

Since that difficult period ten years ago, I have had many opportunities to experience the workings of the Lord in my life. He hasn't always given me what I've asked, and the answers haven't always come easily. But he has never left me alone, and he has never let me down.

Each experience with the Savior leads to greater faith, and as our faith increases, our vision of and confidence about who we are grows clearer. The more we visualize and sense through the impressions of the Spirit our ultimate potential, the more determined we become to achieve it. It's the difference between your mother hounding you to practice the piano and your reaching the point where you want to do it yourself. You simply will not be denied the ultimate reward.

Why is it vital that we as LDS women have a clear vision of who we are and what we are about and have a bedrock faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?

Sister Patricia Holland said something that I find profound: "If I were Satan and wanted to destroy a society, I think I too would stage a full-blown blitz on women" ("Many Things . . . One Thing," *A Heritage of Faith: Talks Selected from the BYU Women's Conferences* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988], 17).

Is that not exactly what he has done? Hasn't he tried to discourage and distract us in every conceivable way? Doesn't he try to block our understanding of how spiritually sensitive our natures are, how anxious and willing the Lord is to speak to us, and how vital we are to the plan and purposes of the Lord? Satan wants us neutralized, because he knows that the influence of a righteous woman can span generations.

His stated purposes are clear—he desires to make us miserable like unto himself (2 Nephi 2:27). He wants us to fail the test—to give up any hope of the Big Finish. Peter delivered a no-nonsense warning: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Indeed, through eons of practice the adversary has perfected the arts of deception, deceit, despair, and discouragement.

Many of his tactics are bold and brazen and played out daily on everything from the Internet to the nightly news. But despite the fact that the adversary's handiwork is outrageously displayed at every turn—pornography, abuse, addiction, dishonesty, violence, and immorality of every kind—many of his strategies are brilliant for their subtlety. "And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say: All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well—and thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell" (2 Nephi 28:21). C. S. Lewis said something similar: "The safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts" (*The Screwtape Letters*

[Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980], 56).

See if any of the following techniques sound familiar.

1. As we have been discussing, Satan tries to blur our vision of why we're here and get us preoccupied with this life. He would have us distracted by and involved in anything and everything except what we came for.

2. He wants us to feel insignificant—that no matter how hard we try, we'll never make much of a difference. Oh, sure, our work is necessary but not very important. *This is a big fat lie*. It is a diversion designed to keep us so focused on any perceived injustices that we completely overlook the opportunities and privileges that are ours, that we underestimate the vital nature of our contribution, and that we never come to understand the power we have to change lives.

Elder Henry D. Moyle said: "I have a conviction deep down in my heart that we are exactly what we should be, each one of us. . . . I have convinced myself that we all have those peculiar attributes, characteristics, and abilities which are essential for us to possess in order that we may fulfil the full purpose of our creation here upon the earth. . . .

" . . . that allotment which has come to us from God is a sacred allotment. It is something of which we should be proud, each one of us in our own right, and not wish that we had somebody else's allotment. Our greatest success comes from being ourselves" (*Improvement Era*, December 1952, 934).

The world can make us feel that we're just another number—to the IRS, to the bank, to the guy who reads the gas meter. Every time I go to New York City on business, and though I love the pulse of that city, I feel swallowed up—by hundreds of skyscrapers that block the light from reaching the ground and a sea of black limousines carrying important people doing important things. The sheer number of people can make you feel like a tiny blob in a mass of humanity. And yet the Great Jehovah, the creator of worlds without numbers, has extended the unparalleled invitation for us to come unto him one by one (3 Nephi 11:15). He who knows even when the sparrow falls also knows our names, our needs, and our desires.

The gospel, with its sanctifying and redeeming power, is available to all. "Thus we may see that the Lord is merciful unto all [I love that word] who will, in the sincerity of their hearts, call upon his holy name. Yea, thus we see that the gate of heaven is open unto all, even to those who will believe on the name of Jesus Christ" (Helaman 3:27-28).

There are no qualifiers relative to age, appearance, intellect or talent, marital status, ethnicity, social standing, or Church calling. When I think of the times in my life that I have felt excluded—because I didn't have the right marital status, or the right look, or the right social connection—it comforts me to know that the Keeper of the ultimate gate, the Host whose guest list I most want to be included on, has placed no limitations on my accessibility to him. He has invited *all* of us to come unto him, to learn to hear his voice, to attach and

commit ourselves to him, and to ultimately enter his presence. During the Mt. Timpanogos temple dedication, President Gordon B. Hinckley said that in the temple there is no aristocracy, "only the aristocracy of righteousness" (Lowell Hardy, Minutes). All of us are eligible to come unto Him to the extent to which we seek to take upon us the name of Christ and reflect his image in our countenances. For he has promised, "Every soul who forsaketh his sins and cometh unto me, and calleth on my name, and obeyeth my voice, and keepeth my commandments, shall see my face and know that I am" (D&C 93:1).

3. Satan tries to wear us down by creating the image that there is nothing glamorous in enduring to the end. It's the very reason I learned the Big Finish first, to keep the ultimate reward in front of me so that I would keep practicing those difficult technical passages that required as much endurance as skill. I have always hated talks on enduring to the end because the very phrase makes life seem like drudgery rather than an adventure. And yet the most haunting regret imaginable would be to pass through the veil and, with the full sweep of eternity opened before our eyes, realize that we had sold our birthright for a mess of pottage, that we had been deceived by the distractions of Satan, and that the Big Finish would never be.

4. The adversary encourages us to judge and evaluate each other—a practice that is demeaning to both the person who judges and the one who is judged. I recently had a young woman whose marriage crumbled tell me how much she loves the gospel but how weary she is of feeling that she'll never be accepted because her life hasn't unfolded as she expected it to. If there is anyplace in the world where every one of us should feel accepted, needed, valued, and loved, it is as sisters in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We ought to give up telling each other how to live our lives. It is wonderful to talk about principles, which apply equally to each of us, but it is rarely helpful to suggest how those principles should be applied.

For example, our prophet has spoken clearly about the importance of building strong families. That's the principle. How that is accomplished, however, will vary from family to family. We could do more good by encouraging each other to develop our spiritual sensitivities so that we can receive inspiration about our own lives. The need for spiritual acuity is universal, for the Lord is in the best position to give advice.

5. Lucifer whispers that life's not fair and that if the gospel were true we would never have problems or disappointments. Bad things shouldn't happen to good members of the Church, should they? The adversary would have us believe that with baptism comes a Magic Kingdom Club Card and that if our lives aren't like perpetual trips to Disney World, we're getting short-changed.

The gospel isn't a guarantee against tribulation. That would be like a test with no questions. Rather, the gospel is a guide for maneuvering through the challenges of life with a sense of purpose and direction. "I feel happy," Brigham Young said. "'Mormonism' has made me all I am, and the grace, the power, and the wisdom of God will make me all that I ever will be, either in time or in eternity" (*Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. [London: Latter-

day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86], 8:162).

6. The adversary attempts to numb us into accepting a sliding scale of morality. Sometimes rationalization overtakes even the best among us. "R-rated movies don't bother me," we sometimes hear. "I go for the story, or the music, and skip over the profanity and the sexually explicit scenes." Yet advertisers pay millions of dollars for a few seconds of airtime on the bet that during brief but repeated exposures to their products we'll be persuaded to try them. If sixty-second ads can influence us to spend money we don't have to buy things we don't need to impress people we don't even like, then how will minutes, hours, months, and years of watching infidelity, violence, and promiscuity affect us? The litmus test for entertainment of any kind is simple: Can you watch or participate in it and still have the Spirit with you?

7. The adversary promotes feelings of guilt—about anything. Pick a topic. You can feel guilty for having a large family—how can any one woman possibly care for eight or nine children? Or for having no children at all—you're not doing your duty. For working outside the home—don't you know what the prophet has said about mothers who seek employment. Or for choosing to stay home—what's the matter, no ambition?

Guilt does not originate with the Savior, who invites us to step to a higher way of living and a more ennobling way of thinking, to do a little better and perhaps a little more. Promptings that come from him are hopeful and motivating rather than defeating or discouraging.

8. Lucifer works hard to undermine our innate tendency to nurture and care for others. His object is to get us so busy and caught up in the "thick of thin things" that we don't have time for each other. Voice messaging is efficient, but it doesn't replace a listening ear and a caring heart. If the adversary can cause us to focus more on our differences than on our similarities, if he can confuse us about who our sisters are and what their eternal potential is, if he can keep us so busy running from one commitment to another that we no longer have time for each other, he has made great strides towards neutralizing the strength and influence that we have.

We need each other. We need each other's testimonies and strength, each other's confidence and support, understanding, and compassion. It is as Martin Luther said: "The kingdom of God is like a besieged city surrounded on all sides by death. Each man [and woman] has [a] place on the wall to defend and no one can stand where another stands, but nothing prevents us from calling encouragement to one another" (in Jeffrey R. Holland and Patricia T. Holland, "Considering Covenants: Women, Men, Perspective, Promises," *To Rejoice As Women: Talks from the 1994 Women's Conference* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995], 105).

9. The adversary would have us hung up on perfection and stymied by the commandment to become perfect. He wants this glorious potential to loom as a giant stumbling block rather than the promise of what is ultimately possible—in other words, to make the Big Finish seem little more than a dream. Every prophet in this dispensation has

explained that we should expect not to achieve perfection in this lifetime. The goal instead is to become pure, so that we are increasingly receptive to the promptings of the Holy Ghost.

The Savior doesn't want us to be paralyzed by our errors but to learn and grow from them. He sees us as works in progress. The faith of the brother of Jared was so strong that he was allowed to behold the Lord (Ether 3:13). Yet prior to that remarkable event, there was a time when the Lord chastened him for three hours (Ether 2:14). If the scriptural account had ended there, minus the "rest of the story," our impression of this righteous man would be different. The rest of *our* stories remains to be told. It is purity, rather than perfection, that we are seeking at this stage of our eternal quest.

10. Lucifer would have us so busy—with family, friends, careers, and every soccer league in town—that there's no time to live the gospel. No time to fast and pray, to immerse ourselves in the scriptures, to worship in the temple—all the things we need to do to "study" for our mortal test. In other words, he wants us to be a little more concerned with the world than with the gospel, a little more interested in life today than in life forever.

11. He delights in portraying religion as something restrictive and austere rather than liberating and life-giving. He depicts the Father and the Son as aloof rulers rather than our deified Father and Elder Brother who love us, who have a vested interest in our future, and whose motive is to help see us through this life so that we are worthy to return to them. He paints eternal life as something out of reach, even other-worldly, something for prophets and a few other select people, a condition you and I could never hope to achieve. And he does everything he can to block the memory of our former home.

He loves it when we seek for security in bank accounts, social status, or professional credentials when ultimate security and peace of mind come only from a connection with the Lord Jesus Christ. He claims victory when we rely on others for spiritual strength—on husbands, leaders, friends, family members. He doesn't want us to find out how intimate our connection with our Father and Elder Brother can be and how palpable and sustaining their love is.

In short, he tries to keep us at arm's length from Jesus Christ. Oh fine, if we profess him to be the Savior—talk is cheap! And if the adversary can keep us so distracted that we never really seek, embrace, and commit ourselves to the Lord, then we will also never discover the healing, strengthening, comforting power available because of the Atonement. We will never know that because of the Savior we have access to everything we need to pass this test.

The antidote to the distractions of the adversary is Jesus Christ. Light *is* stronger than darkness. Jesus Christ illuminates our vision of who we are and why we are here and gives us courage to move forward in the journey toward our heavenly home. The potential reward *is* too good to be true, a Big Finish that makes Rachmaninoff pale by comparison.

Just as Satan's motives have been clearly identified, so are the Savior's, whose express work and glory is to "bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses

1:39). "He doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world, even that he layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him" (2 Nephi 26:24). The contrast between the Savior and Satan is stunning. It is the quintessential difference between light and dark, arrogance and humility, self-interest and charity, power used to destroy and power used to bless. It is the battle between good and evil personified.

Eleven years ago President Ezra Taft Benson issued this charge: "There has never been more expected of the faithful in such a short period of time than there is of us. Never before on the face of this earth have the forces of evil and the forces of good been as well organized. . . . The final outcome is certain—the forces of righteousness will win. But what remains to be seen is *where* each of us . . . will stand in the battle—and *how tall* we will stand. . . . Great battles can make great heroes and heroines" ("In His Steps," address to Church Educational System personnel, Anaheim, California, 8 February 1987).

My dear sisters, you have been called to live and work and raise families in the twilight of the dispensation of the fulness of times, and you are nothing less than the best the Lord has ever had. You are heroines in every sense of that word. Which is why the Lord needs us to arise and be everything we can be. President Howard W. Hunter put it this way: "There is a great need to rally the women of the Church to stand with and for the Brethren in stemming the tide of evil that surrounds us and in moving forward the work of our Savior. . . . Only together can we accomplish the work he has given us to do and be prepared for the day when we shall see him" (*Ensign*, November 1992, 96).

I believe him. The impact of righteous, determined, pure-hearted women today is immeasurable. It doesn't matter where you live, whether or not you have children, how much money you have, or how talented you think you are—or aren't. This is a day when the Lord and his kingdom need women who are firmly grounded in their testimony of Jesus Christ; women of vision who have their sights trained on the purpose of life; women who can hear the voice of the Lord, expose the distractions of the adversary for what they are, and press forward with a sense of purpose and a desire to contribute; women who are articulate as well as compassionate; women who understand who they are, and where they are going, and are determined to not let anything keep them from getting there.

Good women all over the world are desperate for leadership, for role models, for the assurance borne out in lives well lived that families are important, that virtue is not outdated, and that it is possible to feel peace and purpose in a society spinning out of control.

Sisters, we have reason to be the most reassured, the most determined, the most confident of all women. In saying this I don't minimize our personal disappointments. But we know what we're here for. And we know that we are beloved of the Lord.

We are members of the most important and potentially influential women's organization in the world, the only such organization founded by a prophet of God and led by women who do so under the direction of, and therefore with access to, the power of the priesthood of God. Remember President Spencer W. Kimball's statement nearly twenty

years ago about the vital role righteous women would play during the "winding-up scenes" of this dispensation. Sisters, these are the winding-up scenes.

I have a friend who is an executive with a Fortune 500 company. One day we sparred verbally over a definition of the word *power*. His response interested me: "Power is influence. If you have influence, you wield power."

If my friend is right—and I am inclined to agree with him—then collectively and individually we have tremendous power. The influence of the sisters of this Church is overwhelming. We need not be shy or apologetic about who we are and what we believe. Nowhere else in the world are there 4.1 million women who, because of their beliefs and vision of the eternal possibilities, seek after and defend all that is virtuous, lovely, of good report, or praiseworthy—women who are devoted to building, lifting, helping, and loving! Talk about influence!

Who is better suited to defend the sanctity of home and family? Who better prepared to celebrate virtue and integrity? Who better to demonstrate by example that women can be strong and savvy and articulate without being shrill, angry, or manipulative?

Are we not like Captain Moroni's armies who, though vastly outnumbered, were "inspired by a better cause, for they were not fighting for monarchy nor power but they were fighting for their homes and their liberties, . . . yea, for their rites of worship and their church" (Alma 43:45).

You and I compose a pivotal battalion in the army of the Lord! Remember what happened when Captain Moroni hoisted the title of liberty? "Behold, whosoever will maintain this title upon the land, let them come forth in the strength of the Lord" (Alma 46:20).

May we arise as sisters in this, the greatest cause on earth. May we go forward together in the strength of the Lord. More than ever he needs our faith and faithfulness, our vitality and our ingenuity, our unwavering commitment and conviction. We are witnesses of the Lord Jesus Christ, the living capstone of all that has come before us and a vital link to all that lies ahead.

This life is a test. It is also a glorious privilege. May we work toward the kind of Big Finish the Apostle Paul described as he anticipated his journey back home: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord . . . shall give me at that day" (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

May we build and keep the faith. May we go forward together with a clear vision of who we are, what we are about, and how vital our contribution is to the Lord's kingdom. This is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We can make the difference the Lord needs us to make. I know we can. More importantly, he knows we can. For in the strength of the Lord, we can do all things. In his holy name, amen.

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