

THE TROUBLE WITH EXCELLENCE, OR HOW TO VALUE THE "LESS HONOURABLE" GIFTS

Eugene England

There are some things un-Christlike in much of the world's thinking about and striving for excellence. We talk about "getting ahead," "reaching the top," images that suggest competitive warfare, leaving others behind (or underneath) us, defeated, overwhelmed, perhaps even with broken bodies and souls—*victims* of our excellence. And too often we strivers after excellence are the victims. I know a young mother whose parents and husband have stressed so much her need to excel that she is now immobilized by guilt and fear—guilt that she has never measured up to their expectations and fear that she never will. I've seen my children get so concerned about doing some task excellently in order to live up to high standards set by others, including their parents, that they neglect other important things such as kindness, health, peace of mind—and, ironically, sometimes simply because of that anxiety itself they do poor or incomplete work.

Against these images of competition and the "natural" human strivings and anxieties the images encourage, the scriptures pose very different ideas about excellence. Perhaps the two most sought-after and well-respected badges of excellence in our culture are learning and wealth, but the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob warned us that "the wise, and the learned, and they that are rich, who are puffed up because of their learning, and their wisdom, and their riches—yea, they are they whom [Christ] despiseth; and save they shall cast these things away, and consider themselves fools before

God, and come down in the depths of humility, he will not open unto them." (2 Nephi 9:42.) Four hundred years later, the great King Benjamin's last message to his people was essentially the same: they could not "retain a remission of [their] sins," that is, could not experience the Atonement of Christ and live genuinely moral lives, unless they would "always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and [their] own nothingness," their "worthless and fallen state," their awareness that we are "all beggars," dependent on the Lord "for [our] lives and for all that [we] have and are." (Mosiah 4:5, 11, 19-21.)

Christ had his greatest difficulties with the "excellent" and more exalted members of society—the rulers, the scribes and Pharisees, the rich young men. He chose, despite much criticism, to eat with sinners, to take his message and associations mainly to the outcast, the publicans and prostitutes, the poor and unskilled. His apostle Paul expressed explicitly why that was so: "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen." (1 Corinthians 1:27-28.)

Christ went so far as to identify *himself* as one of these despised and weak and "foolish," one whose own "treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are "hid." (Colossians 2:3.) Again and again he inspired the ancient prophets to prophesy that he would come as Savior not in glory and power nor in forms of excellence that would meet with worldly favor, but as one "despised and rejected of men: a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief," one whom we would hide our faces from because "we esteemed him not." Contrary to our worldly notions of the proper role of an exalted "messiah," he would bear our grief and carry our sorrows, would be "wounded for our transgressions," "bruised for our iniquities." (See Isaiah 53 and Mosiah 14.) In fact, in remarkable, uniquely insightful visions to Book of Mormon prophets, Christ revealed that his essential mission was to descend below *all* things human so that he could draw all humans to him in the Atonement. He taught Nephi that he

would "condescend" or literally *descend with* us into the worst of our earthly experience—that is, in the words he gave King Benjamin, into "temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer." And to Alma he made clear that he would actually "take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people," would "take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities." (See 1 Nephi 11:13-27; Mosiah 3:5-7; Alma 7:11-13.)

Christ teaches that it was necessary for him literally to take on himself our human sicknesses and infirmities, to become, in the world's eyes, meek and lowly, weak and foolish. Moreover, we must see him as such, as "the least of these, my brethren," if we are to be able to overcome our worldly pride, accept ourselves as loved by him despite our own weaknesses and sins, and thus be able to experience "at onement" with him and be saved. If we cannot accept ourselves and others as infinitely valuable, despite our infirmities and failures, if we cannot feel the energizing joy of Paul, who exclaimed as his central, redeeming insight, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8), then our own religious and moral life will be incapacitated. The central effort of Christ's at onement is to draw us to him by moving us, with his infinite suffering in the garden where he achieved complete identification with us through the "bowels of mercy," to accept ourselves unconditionally, as he has accepted us, and thus find means that we "may have faith unto repentance." (Alma 34:13-15.)

But hold on, you might well say: if striving for excellence is so dangerous and humility paramount, what about all the emphasis in the scriptures on seeking the best gifts, on "being perfect" ourselves "even as [God] is perfect"? What about Joseph Smith's constant striving and his witness that all who come into the world "are capable of enlargement"—and Brigham Young's continual emphasis on "eternal progression"? Why did Elder Neal A. Maxwell write an invigorating book on "a more excellent way" and President

Spencer W. Kimball energize the Church with a call to "lengthen our stride"? And why, for heaven's sake, are you now offering us a whole volume of essays encouraging "excellence"?

The answer to those good questions is simply that we are dealing here with a paradox, one captured best in the words of Christ: "Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it." (Luke 17:33.) Excellence vs. humility, striving to save our lives vs. finding them through giving, winning the "race" for ourselves vs. sacrificing all for others—these are indeed "contraries," horns of a dilemma, poles of a paradox. But they are unavoidable parts of a real universe in which there must needs be "opposition in all things" (2 Nephi 2:11), and where we can best learn how to live by thinking through the opposed values and reaching some new, transcendent way of living that preserves them both, despite the conflict. As Joseph Smith wrote, "'By proving contraries,' truth is made manifest." (*History of the Church* 6:428.)

The Lord has given us the help necessary to think through these particular contraries in two great parallel passages of scripture about gifts, Doctrine and Covenants 46 and 1 Corinthians 12. In that wonderful invitation to the Latter-day Saints of 1831 to learn to appreciate each other, themselves, and all his Father's children, Christ first taught the new church "never to cast any one out from your public meetings" nor to exclude from church meetings anyone who is "earnestly seeking after the kingdom." He goes on, in that spirit, to teach these new converts, very anxious to progress and prove themselves and (apparently) to judge those who seemed less valiant, that though "all have not every gift given unto them," to "every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God." (D&C 46:3, 5, 11.) To make this perfectly clear Christ enumerates many of the gifts, emphasizing that each is different from the other but that *all are equally valuable and acceptable*: faith to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and faith to believe on the words of those who know; differences of administration (leadership) and diversities of operations (practical skills); wisdom (theoretical) and knowledge

(factual); faith to be healed and faith to heal; working of miracles and prophetic insight; speaking in tongues and interpreting what those speakers say.

In this revelation, Christ continually repeats a central message that could help us all learn to strive for excellence unselfishly, to avoid losing our lives through seeking to save them: The gifts are given, with at least one provided each person, not as a reward or a special blessing to that person, not as a reason for pride or sense of special privilege, but "that all may be profited thereby" (v. 12), "that the manifestations of the Spirit may be given to every man to profit withal" (v. 16). As a solution to the danger of pride and self-centeredness, Christ admonishes the young Church—and all of us—that we should "always remember, and always retain in [our] minds what those gifts are" (v. 10) and "give thanks unto God in the Spirit for *whatsoever* blessing [we] are blessed with" (v. 32; italics added).

This revelation repeats in shortened form what Christ had already taught the apostle Paul eighteen hundred years before. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul enumerates the same gifts and also emphasizes that these differences in the members of the body of Christ have nothing to do with the relative value of each member—all are needed: "If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him." (1 Corinthians 12:17-18.) But Paul carries the point to an unusual insight, which Christ can assume we have in mind when we read the shorter version in Doctrine and Covenants 46: "Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: and those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness." (1 Corinthians 12:22-23.)

This is strange doctrine, of the kind Paul knew would be "foolishness to the Greeks"—that is, to the rational, worldly mind. What? We should honor *more* the feeble, the uncomely among us? Scandalous! But Paul has a good reason

for telling us to do precisely that—if we can see the matter from God's perspective, which is not concerned with comparative, individual excellence but with helping *all* his children become like him and also helping those children learn how to *help each other* reach that goal. This is Paul's reason: "Our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: that there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it." (1 Corinthians 12:24-26.) The "comely gifts"—such as knowledge and wealth—will normally get much honor in human society, in fact, usually so much that Christ has to warn us to give them away, share them completely, or they will canker our souls and destroy us rather than being a blessing to us and others. On the other hand, we must seek to see each other's gifts, however feeble or uncomely in the world's eyes. We must learn to suffer together and share honor together so that we can all be blessed by all our diverse gifts. That mutual blessing, in fact, is why God gave the gifts in the first place.

I know a woman who has great gifts of the less comely kind, and I had to be helped a great deal by the Lord to see them. I first knew her when she approached me for help after hearing me talk in her ward about the grace of Christ, his unconditional love for sinners. How could she cope with her struggles and feelings concerning the two-year-old son she held, a spastic quadriplegic, apparently blind and deaf from some kind of neglect in the hospital after birth? Why had the Lord allowed this to happen to one son and not its twin? Why had priesthood blessings that seemed to promise recovery not yet been fulfilled? How could she and her husband go on holding the boy nearly twenty-four hours a day to keep him from choking to death? How could she be forgiven for sometimes wanting him dead? I didn't have answers, but I held her son while she enjoyed a quiet hour in Sunday School with her husband, and I offered help from my family so she and her husband could get away for some time to-

gether to repair their marriage, which she admitted had suffered much from the strains.

Almost a year later I was called to be bishop of the ward where this woman lived, and as I prayed about the initial organization, I was directed to call her as my first Relief Society president. It made no sense. She was still greatly burdened. She and her husband had decided not to sue the hospital, because "with the Lord's help we are making it, and the suit would waste much money and hurt people to no good purpose," but the husband had left business school to cope with the enormous financial burdens and was planning to move the family to Salt Lake City. However, the call was clear and they accepted. Then I began to learn why.

The gifts she had been given and developed while enduring this great trial came to the fore as she visited each ward family, opened herself and her life entirely to her sisters, and conducted her interviews, her meetings, and even her casual conversations with absolute honesty and down-to-earth forthrightness. Her husband had begun to learn the same forthrightness. He took his painfully abnormal-looking son before the congregation during our first testimony meeting and introduced him to the ward as one whom the Lord loved, who needed *their* love and unself-conscious attention, and whose parents needed their help. I assigned a couple each Sunday to help them through church with their son. And as the members of our ward (mainly bright, upwardly mobile young pre-professionals) experienced quite directly the struggles, the ups and downs of anguish and hope, the need for help, and the enduring through which this family lived each day, we all found how much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary.

I know of a young family in which both parents are seriously handicapped in mental ability and social training. A large part of the energy and resources of their ward go to helping that couple and their bright, energetic child survive and stay together as a family, but the bishop feels that the Lord directed the couple to his ward and that they constitute one of the ward's great blessings. Others in the ward are sometimes, with good reason, offended by this couple—by

their insensitive intrusions into their homes or into the decorum of the sacrament meetings and classes (where I understand they sometimes give “inconsequential” and lengthy testimonies or comments), by their noisy but inadequate attempts to discipline their child, by their lack of training in personal cleanliness, in housekeeping, and in finances, all of which leave them constantly in trouble and troubling to others. But I’m told that even the offended ones are learning some surprising lessons. One recently phoned the bishop to confess in tears that she had learned, through trying to help and be a friend to someone so difficult, what charity really was—how hard and important it was—and had herself embarked on some difficult repentance as a result. Others have grown in the essentials of Church service more than ever before, through taking on total responsibility for training the man in financial matters, even in getting and keeping a job, or working with the couple to establish a family schedule, or helping the woman learn how to manage a home for the first time and how to help the child with learning and discipline. Now, as the couple have progressed to a steady income and stable family life, with a strong, continuing support system firmly around them, the man has been given the Melchizedek Priesthood and the whole ward is looking forward, with unusual understanding of tough service and the grace of God, to the couple’s going to the temple to be sealed for eternity. And that is part of that couple’s gift to the ward, their feeble gift, their very unusual “excellence” that blesses all.

Most of us have known people with such feeble, less comely, and therefore less honored—or even unrecognized—gifts. My neighbor, Roman Andrus, is a fine artist who has trained generations of students and painted some honored portraits and landscapes, but he has a less honored gift that is very important to his neighbors and ward: the gift of telling stories from his youth that convey integrity and humor and love of life. He has probably done more for the salvation of myself and people I love with those excellent stories than with all his excellent paintings. I have another neighbor who has cared for her totally immobilized husband for many years and whose great gift, of great value to all who

know her, is unromantic, gritty, spirited endurance. Her husband's gift is vulnerable need, the courage to keep reading and thinking and reciting poetry and talking through all the pain of bedsores and the humiliation and exposure as we carry and shift and feed and bathe him.

You know the class member who always has the needed facts, even though she can't interpret them well, and the one who is a great interpreter, even though he is impervious to being confused by facts—and how *both* are needed for a good class. Or the mother of six who always seems to know when someone needs help—and who helps that person without anyone else knowing. I know one such woman who always has two or three "lost" people, young and old, living at her home. She is able to hear some guardian angel whisper to her that a young widow in the ward needs a thousand dollars to survive just a little longer, or that a young couple across town, unable to have their own children and unable to adopt because of a huge hospital debt, need a loan so they can go ahead with a family. Excellence for her is not "getting ahead" or "on top," it is not competition and struggle; rather, it is a simple expression of what she is because of the Lord's "less honourable" gifts to her, by which he blesses many others. And my children are learning to be like her.

In a recent address as president of the Association for Mormon Letters, Lavina Fielding Anderson told how she had learned, from a testimony at a gathering of Mormon women in Nauvoo, that even these feeble gifts, even our weaknesses and vulnerabilities, are what we consecrate to the Lord in the temple to use as he will—and that use might include talking about them in *our* writing and testimonies:

"Catherine Stokes, a black convert in a Chicago ward, related the experience of going to the temple for the first time. 'I took my blackness with me,' she said, 'and that was part of what I consecrated.' She told of the woman who assisted her in the initiatory ordinance, barely able to articulate through her tears, and apologizing at the end because she had not wanted her personal emotions to interfere with Cathy's experience. 'But I've never had the privilege of doing this for a black woman before,' she explained, 'and I'm

so grateful.' Cathy reassured her, 'That's all right. That's one of the things I can do for *you* that no one else in the temple today could do.' As she summed up the experience, she added, 'My blackness is one of the things that the Lord can use if he wants to'—and apparently it has been a most successful collaboration."

Excellence, it seems, is not such a simple matter as we might have supposed. It is deadly dangerous as a goal if it leads to destructive competition with others and to pride—or even to mere self-preoccupation, a focus on *our* progress and salvation. In fact, our concern for excellence can destroy excellence. It is often not truly seen, in others and ourselves, because we are beguiled by the honors of men and neglect the excellent but feeble and less comely gifts God has given us, those on which we must "bestow more abundant honour." Excellence sometimes, made into a primary goal, sought after directly, leads us to lose our earthly life—in anguish and depression at our failures—and to forfeit our eternal redemption because we cannot experience the Atonement until we accept God's love of us as we are.

President Spencer W. Kimball, though in many ways our most energetic and motivating recent prophet, has also given us good guidelines and example to counteract these misunderstandings of excellence. He fully revealed the paradox by insisting that his biography, *Spencer W. Kimball*, include, with all the record of achievements, the passages from his personal journals that record his own doubts and despair, his conviction that he was failing his calling, could never measure up. Among a litany of expressions of inadequacy, we see especially the poignancy of his many illnesses—boils, heart trouble, cancer—that caught him up in a vicious circle of feeling "guilty for failing to carry his share of the load," convinced that he was "the least" of the apostles, that the others were "smoother, smarter, more efficient, better educated," and that he must work *harder*, even at the danger of ruining his health, to compensate. "Thousands of people in the Church are measuring the Church, their Church, by me," he wrote. "They look at me with my smallness, my ineptitudes, my weaknesses, my narrow limitations and say,

'What a weak Church to have such weak leadership.' It is one of the things that has brought me to my back now. I have tried by double expenditure of energy to measure up." (Edward L. Kimball and Andrew E. Kimball, Jr., *Spencer W. Kimball*, Bookcraft, 1977, p. 253.)

President Kimball risked death by asking the doctors, in their operation to remove throat cancer, to leave part of his larynx so he could learn the very difficult way of talking that would then still be possible and continue to serve with that "weak" voice, the small but piercing voice that has continued for over twenty-five years to make him possibly our finest, certainly our most challenging and energizing, Mormon orator of the twentieth century. Every time we hear that soft, rough, unique voice we should remember what he has paid for it and remember that excellence in speaking is not winning speech contests or developing a polished and resonant radio announcer's style, but clear sense of purpose and courage to risk letting the Lord use us, even in our weakness. And it is also humility, as President Kimball reminds us constantly with his self-deprecating manner. For instance, when he stated at the close of the October 1975 general conference that his life could be improved and that he intended to do so by applying the ideas from his brethren he had jotted down during the conference, we were moved to increased trust and desire to follow his example rather than any lack of confidence. We all need to be as open about our opinions, our convictions, our experiences and mistakes, even our shortcomings. They are among our gifts—to be used and thus made into strengths, made excellent.

President Brigham Young, who was the prophet of the nineteenth century perhaps most like Spencer Kimball in his energetic, practical counsel and humble forthrightness, gave what seems to me the best help in resolving the paradox of excellence versus humility. He recognized that the desire for excellence—what he called "the principle of improvement, . . . of increase, of exaltation"—is "the main spring of all action" and "should be understood by the child and the adult." (*Journal of Discourses* 2:91.) However, he also taught that not only do we each have a different gift but we each can

become perfect in our own small sphere of effort and influence with that gift—and then be given more and greater gifts and constantly move on to perfection in those higher spheres. Thus, without feeling we are caught up in competition with others, or depressed by a sense of failure because we are never perfect in some absolute sense, compared to others and our own eventual possibilities, we can do the best we can day by day with our most feeble and unhonored gifts, even our weaknesses and needs, letting others also be blessed by blessing us. We can see Christ in the least of our brethren, in the weak and needy around us, even the sick and captive and sinning—even in ourselves. We can be moved to accept ourselves as acceptable to Christ, even though we have failed him, and thus we can receive the Atonement and renew it constantly through the sacrament and temple ordinances and by daily enduring to the end. This is how Brigham Young understood the process by which *every one* of us can find our own unique mode of excellence and aspire, with all others, to Godhood:

“We can still improve, we are made for that purpose, our capacities are organized to expand until we can receive into our comprehension celestial knowledge and wisdom, and to continue worlds without end. . . . If men can understand and receive it, mankind are organized to receive intelligence until they become perfect in the sphere they are appointed to fill, which is far ahead of us at present. When we use the term perfection, it applies to man in his present condition, as well as to heavenly beings. We are now, or may be as perfect in *our sphere* as God and Angels are in theirs, but the greatest intelligence in existence can continually ascend to greater heights of perfection. . . . It is the Deity within us that causes increase.” (JD 1:92-93.)

Our paradox has turned into many “contraries” concerning excellence, and all of them can be helpful if we will follow Joseph Smith’s lead and “prove” or test them out. Striving for excellence will destroy us and others if it prevents us from accepting and loving ourselves and others *as we are now*. Excellence as a goal defined in worldly images can blind us to the destructive effects of competing with

others and make us ignore the "less honourable" but in many ways more needed gifts of humility, peacemaking, comfort-giving, humor, vulnerability, need for help, and so forth, gifts that we need to recognize and honor more—and develop in ourselves and others—so that such gifts can themselves become excellent and a blessing to all: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. For if a man think himself to be somebody, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself." (Galatians 6: 1-3.) And the final paradox, as Paul taught us in his discussion on gifts, as a lead-in to his great sermon on the nature of unconditional love, is that though we must each strive to be excellent in our own gifts, the *greatest of all excellences* is to care most about helping others become excellent in *their* gifts. "Covet earnestly the best gifts," he declared, "and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way. Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, . . . and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, . . . and have not charity, I am nothing." (1 Corinthians 12:31–13:1-2.)

Eugene England and his wife, Charlotte, have six children. She helps him in his assignments as professor of English at Brigham Young University and bishop of the BYU 139th Ward, and he helps her in her dollmaking profession and in developing an ice cream parlor in Provo. Dr. England writes poetry, personal essays (collected and published in Dialogues with Myself), biography (Brother Brigham), and criticism of American—and especially Mormon—literature. He is currently at work on a book to be titled Shakespeare and Melville: Man's Final Lore, and a biography of Joseph Smith, You Never Knew My Heart.