

Honest, Simple, Solid, True

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BYU Devotional Address — January 16, 1996

I stuttered most of the way through school, so badly I could scarcely talk. When I dared, I tried to answer the teacher's questions, but seldom successfully. You have seen the grimace a stutterer makes and the flickering eyelids. I remember the strained expressions on people's faces.

As children often do, I compensated. I became brash, loud, boastful, and competitive — to win the respect I didn't think people would give me otherwise. This put people off, a response which only made me try harder to win their acceptance.

I made pretty good progress in overcoming my stuttering during my school years. Increasingly people treated me as if I were a mature person. Yet my feelings still troubled me — often I felt pitted against others, driven to get my fair share, distrustful and sometimes even scornful of certain people. I caught myself trying to arrange myself in the minds of others, playing a role, posturing. Every year I spoke more smoothly but I couldn't close the gap between the fabricated image I presented publicly and whoever I really was. This caused me a heartache greater than my stuttering did.

Perhaps you too have thought of your life as something of a fabrication. Possibly you also have felt alone, even when you were with others, because of the facade behind which you were hiding. This happened to me when I lived in Manhattan at about your age — in my twentieth year. In a solitude that's possible only in a very large city, my false front became starkly unconvincing to me. I was studying acting with Stella Adler at her studio on Central Park West. One warm evening as we were out walking, a classmate for whom I had great respect confronted me with a terrifying question. "Do you love yourself in the theater," she asked, "or the theater in yourself?" In other words, was I in it for me or because I simply loved it? The question convicted me — the theater makes a tempting platform for posturing. I recall wishing that all my pretensions would collapse completely and leave standing only what was really me. It did not matter any longer whether I would impress anyone or not — if only I could be ... honest, simple, solid, true.

I began a personal quest in that direction, but whatever changes took place in me then were insufficient and impermanent. The same challenge

kept coming back in new forms. I recall, a couple of years later, after my mission, after experiences that seemed to strip some of the veneer away, sitting in a BYU classroom where the teacher was speaking of Joseph Smith, I remember agonizing over a question to which I absolutely did not have the answer. "Can I become like that man?" I asked myself. "Can the being I am be transformed to that extent? Can I ever become so honest, simple, solid, and true as he?"

It troubled me that the question kept returning. I have come to believe this happened because, like a lot of other people of my generation, I had got it wrong. Yes, it takes a lifetime to achieve simplicity, or longer. But I was not making much progress at all. The problem did not lie in my objectives. My objectives were lofty — never stooping to dishonesty, not compromising my principles, standing forward to defend the right and make corrections when things do not go as they should. The problem was that pursuing these objectives was a project on behalf of myself. I could not see it then, but in a very subtle way my quest continued the very preoccupation with myself I was trying to overcome. And it twisted my goal of being true into the goal of being true to me, and being true to me, for my sake, often came before the interests and needs of others. Perhaps my way of pursuing my quest was like that of the prodigal son's elder brother, outwardly ever faithful in his duty but inwardly resentful when his brother received the public honor he thought should be his. My way showed itself as I responded in a hurried manner to a student's question in the hall because, after all, I had important things to do, and in a conversation with a colleague, thinking of what I would say next instead of listening appreciatively, and in becoming inwardly indignant about a brother's false doctrine in priesthood meeting. No matter how rigorous, a quest to be true when undertaken on one's own behalf can never put to silence the disquieting voice that says, "You're not honest, simple, solid, and true. You're still in it for yourself. It's your own agenda that you care most about." Stubbornly setting out to be true cannot be glorious if I do not lift my focus higher than myself.

How then can a person come to be honest, simple, solid, true?

In Jesus' way. In the splendid testament of Abinadi we learn that God himself submitted the tendencies of the flesh to the Spirit, which is to say, to the will of the Father. By dwelling in the flesh the Savior made himself subject to all of these

tendencies, for example, our human disposition to be concerned too much about appearance, to take offense, to seek our own interests, to take advantage, to feel wounded, to retaliate. Indeed, he suffered “afflictions and temptations of every kind” (Alma 7:11.) and “pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death.” (Mosiah 3:7.) No one else could have withstood such pressure to react in our typical, oh-so-human ways. He had infinitely more reason than anyone has ever had to focus on his own self-protection and self-improvement and let the foolish and vicious devour each other. But he did none of these. Instead he suffered without taking any offense whatsoever, without becoming mistrustful, without either retaliating or withdrawing or concentrating on himself. Can you imagine it? Through all this provocation — more than the degradation suffered by the Native Americans and the African Americans, more than the Saints in Missouri, more than any victim of the Holocaust — through all of this there entered into his heart no vindictiveness whatsoever; not even momentarily did his love diminish for any whose pains and sins he bore, including those who in life reviled Him or brutalized His children.

This teaches us that perfect honesty and simplicity consists not in devoting attention to oneself, even when one’s aims are lofty, but in forgetting oneself and responding to others, in love, according to their needs. We are not oysters or abalones, existing in shells — even though that is how we may feel when we become self-involved. We are members one of another, connected to each other, and especially to God, by spiritual sensitivities and obligations profound as eternity. We become most ourselves when we are most true to God and to one another. We become most right with ourselves when we are most right with them. Jesus’ example demonstrates this.

It helps to scrutinize a quest for honesty and simplicity such as mine in the light of His perfect example. Even now, looking back, I do not find harmful intentions in my quest. But to the degree that I was seeking to save my life rather than to lose it, my efforts as a husband and father, as a worker in the kingdom, and as a scholar and teacher, must have done more harm than good. To that degree, my worries about myself led me to slight others or use them for my purposes. I am sure that they felt this subtle violence from me. When treated so, many of them must have been motivated to view me critically,

to struggle against me for attention or opportunity — or else, feeling overwhelmed, to take an unwilling back seat. With much discomfort I recall responding, early in my career, to a paper presented by a fellow philosopher at a conference in the Midwest. Cheerfully but not at all constructively I demolished his argument. “I’m just dealing with his ideas,” I recall telling myself. “How else can the truth be served but under the cold light of reason? How else can professionals sharpen their skills? And what kind of contribution would it make to the advancement of my discipline if I were to hang back from stating the truth?” Painfully feeble excuses, these. They did not disguise my self-seeking at the time nor allay the heartache I have felt in retrospect.

In the way I went about my quest, I find resemblances to Lucifer’s method of waging the Great War he began in heaven against his own brothers and sisters. He had proposed a scheme that he maintained would benefit us all, but was really for his own glory. So when his self-nomination was rejected, he smarted with disappointment and resentment, and set out to make anyone and everyone pay for his defeat. Unwilling, like many of us, to take responsibility for his sin, he sought to shift it elsewhere; as John beheld in vision, he “accused [his righteous brethren] before God day and night.” (Rev. 12:10.) He spread his discontent to throngs of others, stoked their indignation, and marshaled them into a coalition sustained by their shared resentment. In just this pattern, though seldom as viciously, all self-seeking quests to make things better end up by making them worse. First a conflict within ourselves over our own failure to be as we ought to be, honest, simple, solid, and true, and then the inevitable diminishment or manipulation of others. Does James not say this? “From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?” (James 4:1.) Whether it draws blood or wears a civil face, strife among us divides us, takes away our spiritual breath, sweeps us into spirals of retaliation and misery, and gradually addicts us to resentment and revenge. This must be part of what it means to be “encircled about by the bands of death and the chains of hell.” (Alma 5:7.)

How can we ever throw off these bands and chains, and make things better in this world? May I suggest again: in Jesus’ way. Rather than resisting evil, he suffered. Rather than compromise, he suffered. Rather than rejecting of any of us — though every possible provocation to do so was laid upon

him — he suffered. He outlasted all these provocations. He conquered the forcefulness of force. He defeated all the pressures that push humanity toward enmity and discord. He absorbed the terrible poison of vengeance into himself and metabolized it by his love. He broke the grip of death. “And thus God breaketh the bands of death,” Abinadi continued, “having gained the victory over death.” (Mosiah 15:8.)

In the words of our hymn, “I scarce can take it in.” My wife Susan pointed out the spot to me in the Salt Lake Temple where President Lorenzo Snow is said to have met the Savior, and in the moment when I looked, something of the wonder of it overwhelmed my emotions. In what is visible to the eye the Lord “is a man like ourselves” (D&C 130:1), immune from nothing that makes life hard for us, and graced, as Moroni reported from a face-to-face interview, with “plain humility.” Upon this single individual and what he did, rested all our hopes for happiness — the entire significance of our existence — as he, alone, knelt in Gethsemane, then staggered up the road to Calvary, and finally hung upon the cross — not for himself but because of his “loving kindness and his long-suffering towards the children of men.” (1 Ne 19:9.) We see in this what it really means to be honest, simple, solid, true.

This love changes everything. As the Savior promised, it makes all things new. (Rev. 21:5.) No other power calls forth love instead of resistance, changes the heart (Alma 5:9), and actually makes things better rather than worse. Through his gentle example, by the voice of his Spirit, and in the faces of His children, it awakens us to life. For if we heed its invitation, we are stopped short in our arrogance or self-pity or distraction. We are humbled in our pride or anger or selfishness. Simple humility softens pride and may even redeem it.

It intrigues me that the call to love comes so often through the countenances of others. Several individuals I know were struggling to bring to their teaching the right kind of heart. The challenges they faced were a lot like my challenges: they assumed that teaching meant adopting the role, the posture, the social position, and the mask of the teacher, and this kept them from being real to the learners and reaching their hearts. Like many in every walk of life, administrators and performers and counselors and artists and parents, they couldn't quite forget themselves. Given a chance to teach their students, they could only manage to teach their subject. One of them, Brother Douglas, seemed unable to shed his

particular burden of self-concern because of an unreconciled conflict with a man in his ward. He had tried for years to resolve their differences, but to no avail. “Still there remained between us a tension,” he wrote, “a binding yet repelling force that affected not only both of us but our families.” Preparing to relocate to another state, he knew he had to make reconciliation, but try as he might he could not discover where he had been at fault. How could he rectify a wrong he could not identify?

I will give you what happened then in his own words:

*I had intended to go over to this man's house between church meetings, but was detained. Suddenly I saw this brother walk out of the church and cross the parking lot to his car. I cut short the conversation I was in and almost ran after him. When I caught up with him I put my hand on his shoulder from behind, turned him around, entwined our forearms, then pulled him close to me. When you pounce on someone like that it usually means that you have something important to say. But what was I supposed to say? I still wasn't sure what my offense was. It was not until the very moment I looked directly and deeply into this man's eyes for the first time in years that I could see my sin. At that moment I no longer saw him, I saw myself reflected! Where there had been no words to say, I found myself asking this good man for his forgiveness. “Why?” he asked. I heard myself reply, “Because I have loved you less. That is my sin: **I have loved you less.**” Tears filled our eyes as I told him then that I loved him. He knew that I loved him. Whatever else I said after that really didn't matter much. I left him to return to the Church. I glanced back once to see this good brother still standing where I had left him, his head down, and his shoulders gently rolling with his sobs.*

What else than love such as this could lift life to another level, change it not just in a few details but its very quality and character? Harkening to the call of Christ from His Spirit or through another's countenance or both, we become genuinely honest, simple, solid, true — often together with someone we may not have trusted before.

Whether it is felt in his breast or in ours, the Savior's love can achieve what force cannot, because where force calls forth counter-force, love calls forth love. In the human image of his divine sacrifice, we too can outlast and conquer vengeance. I received a while ago a letter from a woman whose father had been emotionally neglectful and whose husband

turned out to be much the same way. When she tried to talk about why he was distant, he said it was because she was always angry. This angered her more, and she told him she was only angry because of his lack of love, which made him more inclined to withdraw. They had got themselves encircled in the bands of death and the chains of hell. She went to the mountains alone, intent upon reading one of the contemporary self-help books. She wrote later:

As the writer began describing the intense need we each have for love, I began to feel more and more deprived, until I felt such a huge longing that I could barely breathe. I decided to write all of this down for my husband to read, and enumerate the many times I had felt emotionally deprived. I began to write furiously, to pour it all out onto the paper. The longer I wrote, the more I began to have a feeling come over me that what I was writing was false. The feeling continued growing until I could no longer squelch it, and I knew intuitively that the feeling was coming from God, that He was telling me that what I was writing was false. "How could it be false?" I asked angrily. "I lived it. I know it was there because I saw and felt it. How could it be false?" But the feeling became so powerful and overwhelming that I could no longer deny it or fight against it. So I tore up the pages I had written, threw myself down on my knees and began to pray, saying, "If it is false, show me how it could be false." And then a voice spoke to my mind and said, "If you had come unto Me, it all would have been different."

I was astounded. I went to Church. I read the scriptures often, I prayed pretty regularly, I tried to obey the commandments. "What do you mean, 'Come unto You?'" I wondered. And then into my mind flashed pictures of me wanting to do things my own way, of holding grudges, of not forgiving, of not loving as God had loved us. I had wanted my husband to "pay" for my emotional suffering. I had not let go of the past and had not loved God with all my heart. I loved my own willful self more.

I was aghast. I suddenly realized that I was responsible for my own suffering, for if I had really come unto Him, as I outwardly thought I had done, it all would have been different. As that horrible truth settled over me, I realized why the pages I had written of my suffering had been false. I had allowed it to happen by not truly coming unto God. That day I repented of not loving God, of not loving my husband, of blaming, of finding fault, of thinking that others were responsible for my misery.

I returned home but did not mention to my husband anything of what had transpired. But I gave up blaming, knowing that I was in large part responsible for the state of our relationship. And I tried to come unto God with full purpose of heart. I prayed more earnestly, and listened to His Spirit. I read my scriptures, and tried to come to know Him better. Two months passed, and one morning my husband awoke and turned to me in bed and said, "You know, we find fault too much with each other. I am never going to find fault with my wife again." I was flabbergasted, for he had never admitted he had done anything wrong in our relationship. He did stop finding fault, and he began to compliment me, and show sweet kindness. It was as if an icy glass wall between us had melted away. Almost overnight our relationship became warm and sweet. Three years have passed, and still it continues warmer and happier. We care deeply about one another, and share ideas and thoughts and feelings, something we had not done for the first 16 years of marriage.

The Savior seems to say to us: "Come unto me, and I will give you such assurance and hope and strength that you cannot be taken hostage by anyone who seems to do you harm. I will liberate you into love. And then you will no longer give anyone cause to resent or fear you. Instead, they will respond to the love which I have bestowed upon you. By abiding in me, you will do much good, bear much fruit."

How then shall we come unto Christ, so that everything will be different from what it could possibly be otherwise? By sacrificing all taking of offense. By giving up criticism, impatience, and contempt, for they accuse the sisters and brothers for whom Christ died. By forswearing vulgarity and pornography, which diminish both the user and the used. By putting aside, in short, every practice that bears the image of murder, obliteration of souls, discord, and death. By giving these practices their true name, violence, and abhorring even their first appearance. By renouncing war in every form and proclaiming peace.

This requires us to look upon interruption and frustration and insubordination and disrespect and scorn and even abuse — all the treatment from others that we must renounce for ourselves — as opportunities for choosing good over evil. Do not love and do good only to those who will reciprocate, the Savior taught; it takes no particular righteousness to do that. (Luke 6:32–33.) Listen attentively to the teacher whose lectures may be a little dry. Read with

particular care the papers of students who struggle to write. Befriend the one who feels different, lost, or lonely. Embrace the child who seems to resist you. Take seriously the advice of parents who have trouble following that advice themselves. Invite to dinner those who lack the graciousness or the means to invite you back. Even “Love your enemies and do good to them that hate you.” (Luke 6:27.) Like the Father, let your warming sun and nourishing rain fall on the just and unjust alike. Jesus intimated that this kind of love is who we really are — the very perfection, completeness, and fullness were came here to attain. (Matt. 5:45–48.) And anything less — judging others and withholding our favor from them — capitulates to Satan. After all, it is with us as it was with the Redeemer: *Satan does not need to overpower us in order to win the war. He only needs to get us to adopt his way of fighting it.*

Sacrificing the tendencies of the flesh in Jesus’ pattern matters more than we can imagine. In every moment we are choosing either liberty and eternal life, in the Savior’s pattern, “according to the will of the Holy Spirit,” or “captivity and death,” in Satan’s pattern, “according to the will of the flesh and the evil that is therein” (2 Ne. 2:27–29) — and everything depends upon how we choose. I have learned this lesson serving in the priesthood. I have for example heard the Spirit express in blessings, through my lips, respect and gratitude for the striving of some who were still struggling to overcome sins that began in their harsh childhood homes. I have heard the Spirit reverence the contribution of a once robust and successful young man named Joe made immobile at age 31 by a brain infection that led to a series of strokes, scarcely able to follow the simplest conversation, and capable of speaking only a few halting words. Joe is the husband of one of our students here, who loves him devoutly. In giving him a blessing as his bishop I discovered to my wonder that in the way he has received his misfortune, he has been consistently pure and valiant — so much so that he has added substantially to the reserve of righteousness on the earth. This contribution, Joe was told, has helped delay the destructions which are coming, so that the Gospel may be preached to all peoples.

Where good and evil are concerned, there’s no such thing as being sidelined or taking time-out. Everything we do, everything we say, everything we think and feel, makes a difference, especially considering the season of war in which we live.

When war is being waged, wasting time becomes malingering. Selfishness counts as hoarding material needed for the battle. A little casual sin collaborates with the enemy. We must, quite literally, take care, for we can overcome Satan and his angels only in the way we overcame them in heaven, by “the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of [our] testimonies,” staying true in spite of the cost, “even unto the death.” (Rev 12:11)

Consider the Brethren who lead us. They administer the kingdom in the Savior’s pattern. Not by policy and impersonal distance, as happens in human organizations that grow very large, though they of course must meet and plan. They minister. They attend to individuals, putting themselves out as much as it takes, welcoming the interruptions that make many leaders impatient. I have seen it over and over. Five times in the past year or two, that I know of, one or another of these leaders appeared at this home or that in our ward to visit and cheer a widow, a dying widower, a brother debilitated by illness. One of the Twelve came with his wife to give a blessing to my daughter-in-law and it was learned he had just visited someone in a hospital in Springville and was on his way to give still another blessing. One of us expressed surprise that as an apostle he would have time to be going about the countryside attending to the needs of individuals. Gently he explained that his calling is to be a minister in just this way. The telling blows against evil are struck, one act of love at a time.

We can strike such blows here, at BYU. President Bateman last week expressed his conviction that this university is part of the Kingdom of God. Perhaps this means that, like Zion itself, “it cannot be built up unless it is by the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom” — which requires, among other things, that we be united (D & C 105:4–5.) It means devoting our time and energy to one another, rather than concentrating only on our own function and advancing only our own interests. Upon returning from class one day, my daughter shared this experience of one of her classmates. Chris was a young father who, not far into the semester, had become overwhelmed by the pace of the class. His attendance flagged; after a while he did not come at all. My daughter was surprised when he showed up for the mid-term exam. When the test was over he told her that a few days before, the professor, one of the most internationally distinguished at this university, knocked on the door of the trailer where

Chris lived with his family. Since Chris had no phone, the professor had gone to the school records, located the number of his parents in Pennsylvania, and obtained his address by calling them. At the door he said simply, "I haven't seen you for a while and have worried about you. The mid-term exam is coming up and I'd like to know what I can do to help you prepare." Honest, simple, solid, true.

Except for differences in detail, this same story can be told about many on this campus — about faculty or staff members caring for one another, about administrators making accommodation for individuals' special needs, about students sustaining each other and their teachers through difficult times. One Saturday morning our family was working in the garden when the Jeff Hollands drove up in front with a firm cabbage to give us and sang in unison from their car, "Hooray for the Warners, hooray, hooray, hooray!" I suspect they stopped at other places that morning. He was our president at the time.

This university has not come this far because we have more time for scholarship than the faculty and students elsewhere, or because our IQs are higher, or because we're more fiercely competitive. And it will not realize its prophetic destiny for any of these reasons. We have come this far and we will attain that destiny because, in the long term and very often in the short one, people respond more energetically, think more clearly, work more joyfully, and build more wisely, when they put one another ahead of self; when they welcome the interruption brought on by another person's need; when they do their work in ways that enhance each other's work; when they forget about getting credit; when they renounce in their hearts all sense of belonging to an elite company, even a company of the brightest or best-trained or the most doctrinally pure; when they reach out to and embrace those who are violating all these principles. I am here this day because of those who treated me graciously in spite of my frequently making things worse by trying aggressively to make them better, when patience would have been much the wisest way.

Please do not misunderstand: I offer here no excuse for poor performance or low expectations. Letting one's colleagues or students or teachers or family down is no more caring than it is honest. I am not speaking of lowering our aims but of raising them — precisely by purifying our hearts in Christ and putting each other first for His sake.

With President Bateman's calling we pass through yet another portal. As we by our choices, moment to moment, determine the future we will have together in our families and here at the university, we would do well to remember: It all will be different, it will all be redeemed and made new, if we come unto Him. Only thus will we become, together, and in the best way possible, honest, simple, solid, true.

I close by speaking once again of our great Captain in the war we fight by means of love. In all generations idealists and revolutionaries of many religious and political persuasions have tried to rouse the world to bring an end to violence, to pull down oppression, to oppose every form of domination of one being over another, and many remarkable souls have dedicated all they possessed to making these ideals real. But only one, the model of all peacemaking, entered the wine press alone and actually broke the power of selfishness, enmity and death. Only one possessed the keys of death and hell. What so many in their shock over wars and suffering have tried in human ways to accomplish, He actually accomplished, and therefore it is because of him alone that all the highest aspirations of our race will come to pass. "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain... ." (Rev. 21:4.) No wonder the tens of millions of the heavenly host cried aloud when they learned of what he would do, "Worthy is the lamb that was slain... Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power be unto him... ." (Rev. 5:12-13.) No wonder the Kingdom He established cannot be counted merely as one among many others, but stands alone as the hope of the world.

We join the choirs that sing His praise by living lives devoted to one another, for His sake. And then we will discover afterward, and to our surprise, that what we have given up trying to achieve on our own has come to pass, that He has changed our hearts and made us as He is, honest, simple, solid, and true. That this may be our blessing I pray, in His holy name, Amen.