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Keynote Address by Parley L. Belnap

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CONTROLLING OUR THOUGHTS

The Lord has given us our agency, which is necessary for our growth and development. We are accountable, not only for our actions and words, but also for our thoughts and we must accept the consequences for our choices. Thanks to the atonement of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, we are not locked in to past unacceptable choices. The scriptures emphasize these points many times. In Proverbs we read: "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he." (Proverbs 23:7)

President James E. Faust gave a wonderful sermon on the power of self-mastery at the General Conference Priesthood Session in April 2000:

Every human soul . . . has the challenge of controlling his or her thoughts, appetites, speech, temper, desires. . . I now turn to mastery of our own private thoughts. In this realm, conscience is the only referee that can blow the whistle when we get out of control. If not bridled, our thoughts can run wild. Our minds are a part of us that really require discipline and control. [President James E. Faust, "The Power of Self-Mastery," *Ensign*, May 2000]

In the book *But I Played It Perfectly in the Practice Room*, we read:

When we internalize the fact that we become what we think, we are more encouraged to consider our thoughts, and explore the many possibilities and options that may be actualized in us. [Charlotte Sibley Whitaker, Donald Ray Tanner; *But I Played It Perfectly in the Practice Room*; (Lanham, Maryland 20706: University Press of America, 1987), p. 56.]

So critical is it that we understand the necessity of controlling our thoughts that President Spencer W. Kimball devoted a whole chapter to it in his book *The Miracle of Forgiveness*. [Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, Chapter 8, "As a Man Thinketh," (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969)]

In Galatians 6:7-8 we read: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. He that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting."

In LDS Hymn 216, we find the following:

We are sowing, daily sowing
Countless seeds of good and ill,
By a whisper sow we blessings,
By a breath we scatter strife,
In our words and thoughts and actions

Lie the seeds of death and life.

The scientific as well as the medical world emphasizes the strong unity and correlation between the mind and body. A poem I have heard frequently clearly tells the relationship and importance of our thoughts:

Sow a thought and you reap an act;
Sow an act and you reap a habit;
Sow a habit and you reap a character;
Sow a character and you reap a destiny.

William James wrote, “The greatest revolution of my life is the discovery that individuals can change the outer aspects of their lives by changing the inner attitudes of their minds.”

Brian Tracy states:

Your thoughts vividly imagined and repeated, charged with emotion, become your reality. Almost everything you have in your life has been created by your own thinking.

Put another way, thoughts are things. They take on a life of their own. First you have them, then they have you. You act in a manner consistent with what you are thinking about most of the time. You eventually become what you think about. And if you change your thinking you change your life. . .The one thing you must do is to create the mental equivalent of what you want to experience in reality. [Brian Tracy, *Maximum Achievement*, (New York City: Simon and Schuster, 1993), p. 56.]

Great emphasis is put on positive thinking and positive attitudes as a major part in overcoming illness, personal problems, developing good marriage relationships, developing good work relationships, preventing problems and promoting health. Textbooks, scientific books, and self-help books have been written in the past twenty or so years on relaxing, mental practicing, overcoming stage fright, and preventing overuse problems of the hands and arms. There is great emphasis on retraining the mind by retraining and controlling our thoughts.

Regarding controlling our thoughts in our performances, let me tell you some of my personal challenges. But first I will give a brief introduction to my developing an interest in music. As a child my thoughts, desires and interests were beginning to be channeled into music. When I was nine years old, I started piano lessons with my Aunt Mabel Belnap in my hometown of Hooper, Utah. I loved the piano and loved to practice.

My introduction to performing in church began when I was twelve years old and I was ordained a deacon. Bishop Levi Beus was bishop of the Hooper Ward of the Weber Stake in Weber County, west of Ogden, Utah. He called me to play the piano for priesthood meeting. I had been taking piano lessons from my Aunt for three years. I enjoyed this calling. I even made my own piano arrangement of Come, Come Ye Saints, which seemed to please the priesthood leaders and members. I suppose I did it for the 24th of July one year.

When I was a teenager, KSL radio broadcast 15 minutes each weekday of the half-hour noon recitals of the Tabernacle Organ on Temple Square. When I was out of school during the summers, I

listened faithfully to these broadcasts. It was a wonderful introduction to the organ for me and I truly learned to love its sound. I also listened Sunday evenings to a radio program called “Sunday Evening on Temple Square”—a broadcast of a half-hour organ recital by Alexander Schreiner and also Frank W. Asper. I also regularly listened to a radio broadcast of E. Power Biggs playing the organ from the Harvard Germanic Museum in Boston, Massachusetts. So my interest and love for the organ was being developed.

I was blessed with two fine piano teachers who prepared me well for a later choice to be an organist. I had many opportunities to accompany choirs, soloists, and play the piano with the Weber High School Orchestra and at Weber College in Ogden. I started organ lessons when I was a junior at BYU, where I was one of the piano accompanists for the major choirs. I loved music and the opportunity to serve.

Sometime later I was blessed with a scholarship from the Belgian-American Educational Foundation to study for two years with Flor Peeters at the Royal Flemish Conservatory in Antwerp, Belgium.

At the end of my second year, I was working toward a diploma in organ performance at the Conservatory. I would like to relate to you a personal experience which shows inadequate control of my thoughts:

I had to prepare two examinations, one exam being a recital program. The jury consisted of 5 judges from the conservatories of Belgium and Holland. One of the pieces I played was the Chorale in E Major by Cesar Franck.. I was playing well and when I got to the last page, I congratulated myself and was thinking “you have played this piece without a mistake—just one page to go.” Pride goeth before the fall. Ten measures from the end I goofed in a pedal passage. I was devastated but was still awarded the diploma with honors. So it is a mistake to congratulate yourself before it is over. I didn’t keep my thoughts focused until the end. This work lasts 15 minutes and I didn’t endure to the end. My advice is “control your thoughts; it isn’t over until it is actually over.” I have learned much from this experience.

In performing, it is so easy to worry and wonder when you will make a mistake. Perhaps you think of some fine musician in the audience and what he or she will be thinking. This is disruptive to you and your performance. We need to recreate the music, keeping focused on the joy of making beautiful music for the edification of our fellowmen and for the glory of God. If we allow worries to come into our thoughts, they could well become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Prepare well and trust your preparation. Think ahead somewhat, think in larger units, avoid worry, but trust. Mental rehearsal and controlling your thinking will be a stabilizing source for your performance. Avoid the fear of making a mistake. It will cause you to have a problem.

Flor Peeters, my teacher at the Royal Flemish Conservatory, told me that I needed to practice more at my table, meaning to practice mentally. Because I was on a scholarship, I was practicing 6 to 8 hours a day but needed to practice more effectively. He said that I should go through the music in my mind with my thoughts, visualizing the music and recreating it mentally. I determined to practice consistently both physically and mentally. The results were amazing. I felt I had learned the music in half the time. In addition, my performance was more secure and with much less mind wandering.

The principle of mental practicing is a regular and important part of sports training, as well as other performance-related activities. This clearly emphasizes the point that controlling our thoughts is a major part of controlling our actions.

The Germans have a saying, “We cannot prevent the birds from flying overhead, but we can prevent them from nesting in our hair.” This means that we can’t always control the thoughts that enter the mind, but we can control whether or not we let them stay.

Vicktor Frankl was a neurologist, a psychiatrist, and a very wealthy man in Vienna when the Nazis took over. He spent several years of his life in concentration camps, surviving unspeakable atrocities at the hands of his captors. In his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Vicktor Frankl writes:

The experience of camp life shows that man does have a choice of action. There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome, irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress. There is sufficient proof that everything can be taken from man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s way. [Vicktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1939), pp. 103-104]

We are challenged by the Lord, Latter-day prophets and apostles and leaders to control our thoughts. Scientific research has emphasized the importance of the mind/body relationship. Medical research indicates the importance of controlling our thoughts, attitudes, and feelings as an important factor in a healthy life style. Sport leaders and other performance-area leaders stress the importance of the mind in relaxation, skill achievement, and performance. In fact, mental rehearsal is advocated in order to prevent and overcome overuse problems of the hands, arms, legs and general body. It is a help in concentration and a preventative for mind wandering in any type of performance. So controlling and channeling our thoughts is very important—how we engage the mind in what we do.

Boyd K. Packer states,

“Probably the greatest challenge to people of any age, particularly young people, and the most difficult thing you will face in mortal life is to learn to control your thoughts. “As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.” (Proverbs 23:7) One who can control his thoughts has conquered himself. [Boyd K. Packer, "Inspiring Music--Worthy Thoughts," *Ensign*, January 1974, p. 25]

In *Doctrine and Covenants* 38: 30, we read, “If ye are prepared ye shall not fear.” Your preparation gives stability and the ability to perform well and consistently. You will perform generally how you practice. Some practical things I have learned for performance may be of help to you:

1. Plan your fingering and pedaling; write enough in your music so you can be consistent each time
2. Practice slowly and carefully. Learn each part by itself with consistent fingering and pedaling. Use 7-step and or 15-step method of practice.
3. See music in groups, units, motives, and phrases; do not play note by note.
4. Analyze form, melodic structure, and cadences. Think music in larger units--compare to reading sentences, even paragraphs.
5. Use mental practice as well as physical practice.

6. Practice for 25 minutes and then take a five-minute break. This will help you avoid overuse and help you avoid mind wandering in performance.
7. Keep your mind active and alert as you practice. See patterns in music; notice repetitions, musical shapes, cadences, etc. Discover all you can about the music you play.
8. Avoid mindless repetitions; it will help you avoid mind wandering when you perform.
9. Plan your practice; set realistic goals for each practice session.

In the book *But I Played it Perfectly in the Practice Room* by Whitaker and Tanner, we read:

Recent research has produced amazing results in determining that an extremely large amount of our responses are directly related to the attitudes and thoughts within our mind. [Whitaker and Tanner, *But I Played it Perfectly in the Practice Room*, p. 37.]

President Ezra Taft Benson has stated:

The Lord said, “Look unto me in every thought.” (D&C 6:36) Looking to the Lord in every thought is the only possible way we can be the manner of men and women we ought to be.

The Lord asked the question of His disciples, “What manner of men ought ye to be?” He answered his own question by saying, “Even as I am” (3 Nephi 27:27) To become as He is, we must have Him on our mind—constantly in our thoughts. Every time we partake of the Sacrament, we commit to “always remember Him.”

If thoughts make us what we are, and we are to be like Christ, then we must think Christlike thoughts. Let me repeat that: if thoughts make us what we are and we are to be like Christ, we must think Christlike thoughts.

Paul, en route to Damascus to persecute the Saints, saw a light from Heaven and heard the voice of the Lord. Then Paul asked a simple eight-word question—and the persistent asking of the same question changed his life. “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (Acts 9:6) The persistent asking of that same question can change your life. There is no greater question that you can ask in this world. “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” [President Ezra Taft Benson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “Think on Christ,” *Ensign*, April 1984, p. 9]

A wonderful example of obedience to this thought, “Lord, what wilt thou have me do,” is the following story of Clara Neu, which I have permission to use. Quoting Sister Neu’s own words:

My maiden name was Clara Grover Tilton, and I was at Syracuse University from the fall of 1956 to June of 1960, when I graduated with a BM in organ performance, summa cum laude and also received the Outstanding Music Student Award of the year. Dr. Poister, who never wanted to be called that, only Mr. Poister, was my teacher every semester except one, when he went on sabbatical. I was very blessed that way – I had no idea when I auditioned for him and asked him whether, if I came to Syracuse University, he would be my teacher, that he really didn’t teach undergraduate students anymore. He assured me at that time that he would teach me, and so it was.

May I interject that Arthur Poister is considered by many to have been one of the greatest organ teachers of the world. In 1979 at BYU he gave the last master class of his life. Continuing Sister Neu's story:

My study with Anton Heiller in Vienna, Austria, began in the fall of 1960 on a Fulbright Scholarship and lasted until spring of the next year.

Again, parenthetically, Anton Heiller had an international reputation, with students coming from all over the world to study with him. Continuing with Sister Neu's words:

Brother Ray Arbizu, a voice teacher from BYU, was on a Fulbright Scholarship in the same group as myself. Heavenly Father saw to it, frankly, that I was quite humbled at the time and looking for an anchor in my life. I had been a Methodist. I joined that church at junior high school age in order to participate in the choir program, and because I was studying organ and piano with the Methodist organist, John Ferris, who later became the university organist at Yale University.

I had a childhood testimony of Jesus Christ, but did not have more than that inside. A fellow Fulbrighter, Ann Alberts and I went at Ann's instigation to see Marion and Ray Arbizu. Ann had said that if anyone could help me at that point in my life, it would be the Arbizus. They taught us the gospel with tears in their eyes, until 2:00 am. with young children wailing to be put to bed. I felt something different and remarkable in the Arbizu apartment. The Holy Spirit bore abundant and generous witness to me that what I was hearing was true, and I needed to do something about it. The Arbizus gave Ann and me a Book of Mormon, but Ann would not let me have it at first, saying that I had not read enough in the Bible. So I commenced there, and soon got the chance to read in the Book of Mormon. Also, Ray and Marion gave us a copy of "The Articles of Faith" by James Talmage. I read that also from cover to cover and checked out every single footnote in the scriptures.... It all added up. Ann and I went back to the Arbizus and Ray asked if we would like to come to church. We did, and it was very nice. I was impressed by the simplicity—there was no chapel in Vienna in 1961, and we met in a rented room over an auto-body shop. But the spirit of sincerity was strong, and I found it without frills, but honest and good.

Ray Arbizu finally asked if we would like meet with the missionaries, and I remember saying to him, "Well, is that how we get in?" On our first meeting, one of the elders said to us that if we would read the Book of Mormon, we would come to know that it was true. I remember replying that I already knew it was true. He then looked quickly at his companion and said he would like us to prepare to be baptized. We were both baptized (and are both still active in the church) in a swimming pool, the Deanabad, by Ray Arbizu himself on 17 January 1961. . . For me the story becomes a little more difficult at that point. I wrote a letter home to my parents telling them that I was investigating the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The next letter that I wrote home was to tell them that I had been baptized. Mother came as quickly as she could to talk me out of that commitment. She....was determined that I should not continue as a Mormon, and was unwilling to listen to anyone's defenses. And so with this battle raging, my study shortly ended in Vienna. We came home and continued the fight.

I had been accepted at Union Theological Seminary as an organ student candidate for the Master of Sacred Music degree, planning before my joining this church to be a protestant

organist and choirmistress and went there that fall. I completed the degree but felt that my organ teacher, Vernon de Tar, resented my new found religion. My mother had a confrontational interview at one point during those two years at Union with the Dean of Students as to why no one had been able to turn my mind back to being a Protestant.

John Schreiner, Alexander Schreiner's son, brought her to church the first time she went to the Manhattan Ward in New York City. Clara met Robert Neu there and began a courtship. They married August 3, 1963, in the Manhattan Ward and were sealed two weeks later in the Swiss Temple. Their seven children were born in New York. Clara Neu decided to direct her efforts eventually to her family and gave up her position in the Christian Science Church at Red Bank. Sister Neu remembers not wanting to have conflict and questions from their children as to why Mother went somewhere else to church. She decided that she was going to go where her family went and where she wanted them to be; so she closed the chapter of trying to be a professional church organist.

Back to Sister Neu's own words:

All five of our sons have served missions. All five of our children's marriages so far have been temple marriages. We have been active in the church all the time. We have prioritized Church participation in our lives, feeling that the gospel and the church were of paramount importance, and if we could do other things also, it would be fine, but nothing at the expense of the first. I feel that we have been greatly blessed.

Our missions here in London are a delight. This is the first mission we have served. Robert is truly the office boy, and enjoys it. I run the concert series at the Hyde Park Chapel. Our first concert of the Winter Series was 17 January 2008, and we just had the last one, an organ concert 2 August 2008 by Ruth Eldredge. It was lovely. My calling is also to teach organ and piano. I have three or four active organ students and about 40 piano students. I have some real young children, some teenagers and then quite a few adults. All are beginning to intermediate level. . . I do think this work is worthwhile.

The Lord knows us, our talents, our needs, and our thoughts and desires. If we keep our thoughts pure and directed to do His will he will be able to use us in the great Latter-day work, as he is using Sister Neu. What a great blessing for her, Brother Neu, and for others in London, England! What a wonderful example of a person acting on righteous thoughts and impressions!

Controlling our thoughts blesses various aspects of our lives--from the practical to the spiritual. In the words of Elder Boyd K Packer, "I have come to know that thoughts, like water, will stay on its course if we make a place for them to go." [Elder Boyd K. Packer, "Inspiring Music--Worthy Thoughts," *Ensign*, January, 1974, p. 25]

Especially, may our thoughts be of Christ, and may we strive to be more like him, love and serve Him with all our heart, soul, and mind, and always remember Him.