

We Are the Product of Our Choices



President Eric B. Shumway
President of Brigham Young University-Hawaii
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Aloha. And a special aloha to the many returning students and the arrival of new students from various parts of the world: this aloha includes new faculty and staff who have been guided and prepared to be here. It is an honor and a blessing to speak to you at the opening devotional of another academic year, when there is so much excitement in the air, anticipation, and opportunity.

Several years ago in a tennis game, I was struck in the right eye by a hard hit tennis ball. Shaking off the pain, I continued to play. A few months later in another tennis match, I was struck in the same eye by a similarly hit ball. A visit to an eye specialist revealed that my eye was damaged permanently. I was informed that, among other things, it would be permanently dilated and require protection from the sun or any bright light for the rest of my life.

Except for the inconvenience and the strange appearance of two noticeably different dilated eyes, I went on as usual, not aware of any difference in my vision. However, in a regular visit to my optometrist, I was alarmed by what he said was a deterioration of the optic nerve in my injured eye. A second examination by an ophthalmologist revealed that nearly thirty percent of my optic nerve was destroyed due to what he described as post trauma glaucoma, a condition he said is as insidious as it is dangerous.

The insidious part is that the condition frequently destroys the optic nerve with few if any symptoms of pain or loss of eyesight. The dangerous part is that once you do start to notice a loss of eyesight, the optic nerve is all but gone. And when it is gone, it's gone. There is no regeneration or restoration. There is only one result, blindness.

Catching this condition early, I now take high-powered eye drops morning and night to keep the pressure within my eye down and the optic nerve intact.

Glaucoma is only one of many diseases that can work silently and imperceptibly and without painful symptoms until suddenly it's a crisis, the body is overwhelmed, and the result is death, or blindness, or paralysis or some condition that is irreversible.

I've thought about how so many silent things in our lives can overwhelm a person, problems that did not seem like problems, because they were to us somehow imperceptible or unimportant. Or in the exuberant optimism

and energy of youth we pay them no serious attention thinking that somehow they will either go away on their own, or we will be able to send them away at a time we think convenient.

Now there are many things in our lives that creep up on us, challenges and temptations that blind-side us. We don't have control over them. We don't choose them. For example, an automobile accident suddenly destroys health or fortune, a mother gives birth to a Down's Syndrome child and her whole life requires major adjustment. One's house burns down, or business fails. A diver hits the bottom of the pool with his head and is paralyzed for life. Or you are forced into a situation you have no control over by someone who, for whatever reason, may have evil intentions toward you.

These misfortunes are not our choices, but they happen. Thankfully, there are doctors and counselors and bishops and family who can help and can prescribe things that we can do to recover equilibrium and move on with our lives. Indeed, faith in Christ's atonement and a testimony of the healing that can take place through Christ in this world, and a hope for a better life in the next, can help us endure, even see these disasters as blessings in the eternal perspective of things.

On the other hand, there are creeping and insidious dangers that will cause blindness and suffering and spiritual death, things that come upon us because of our own agency, choices that we make. Our eyes are wide open but our rationalizations tell us that it's not that bad or it's no big deal or I can get out of this anytime I want.

Many times our rationalizations extol falsely our ability to repent and change. Elder Boyd K. Packer, speaking on this campus years ago, illustrated the dangers of this mindset by telling a very famous Chinese fable from the ancient past. What this fable teaches we all must learn. Here it is:

There once was a skylark, a beautiful and gifted bird. He was born to sing. When he rose into the sky to warble his beautiful notes, everybody listened and everybody admired.

As gifted souls will, the skylark devoted himself to his performance. Was not singing a gift? Must he not share it?

This devotion did not exhaust his talent but improved it. And the day came when he could sail into the sky and sing all day, and well into the night.

Except for one thing. He, like other souls, must eat.

How he begrudged the hours spent in grubbing for worms. How he detested groveling with the other birds, the common birds, the sparrows, for instance. They could not sing as he could, and there were so many of them.

Surely, he thought, there must be some way for him to be fed without continually interrupting his singing. Did he not deserve that much out of life?

One day someone offered him a worm. "Here, take this, you should not have to work as others do. You were born to sing."

What was wanted in exchange? Oh, nothing, really!

"Do you not deserve it? Well, perhaps one small thing in return: one of your wing feathers, a very little feather from underneath your wing. It will not show at all. You will not even know that it is gone."

A worm for a wing feather, a very small feather what good fortune!

"At last," thought the skylark, "I can live according to my pleasure."

The feathers would not be missed and they were not, not at first, not until his so-called benefactor demanded one of his flight feathers. Even then he could fly almost as well without it and still live according to his pleasure.

Now [asked Elder Packer] need I tell you the rest of the fable?

Surely you know that the day came when the skylark could no longer fly. In his wretched state he yearned to have what the sparrows had, for they were free, and he was not.

A worm for a wing feather is not a bargain. It is not a fair exchange at all.

One of the greatest gifts in life and in eternity is our precious agency, the right and the privilege to choose. This right becomes especially precious and critical when we come to understand the difference between good and evil. That difference does not merely affect choices to do good or not to do good or not to do evil. It also includes not choosing anything at all. We must cherish the right to choose by cultivating two things: a clear vision and understanding of the good and the evil in our environment on this planet, and a determined sincere desire to choose to do good and to choose not to do evil.

In the case of the skylark, his choice was to give up what he considered to be small and irrelevant. For what? Like so many humans, the skylark makes choices according to his pleasure in the following sins: pride, vanity, convenience or expediency, and indulgence. Choices guided by these evils bring about the skylark's loss of freedom. His so-called benefactor becomes his master, and in the end, since he is not fit to fly, he is ready for the cage.

By itself, each individual bad choice doesn't seem too bad, but there is a cumulative effect, a slow crescendoing of inevitable consequences to all bad choices, even unto the loss of everything he loves.

Remember, Samuel the Lamanite, cast out of Zarahemla for preaching repentance, returning and climbing the walls of that great city and preaching to a once righteous, now apostate people? Because these people knew the truth before, knew the good, and because they were free to choose, he warns them of the inevitable consequences of evil choices.

And now remember, remember, my brethren, that whosoever perisheth, perisheth unto himself; and whosoever doth iniquity, doeth it unto himself; for behold, ye are free; ye are permitted to act for yourselves; for behold, God hath given unto you a knowledge and he hath made you free.

He hath given unto you that ye might know good from evil, and he hath given unto you that ye might choose life or death; and ye can do good and be restored unto that which is good or have that which is good restored unto you; or ye can do evil and have that which is evil restored unto you. (Helaman 14:30-31)

Notice that when the prophet Samuel talks about bad choices, he calls them sin and iniquity. Sometimes in our present efforts to be politically correct, so called, or to ease our conscience, we use the term "poor choice" as a euphemism, making the sin seem not quite so bad. Like the student, expelled from school for lying, cheating, and breaking the law of chastity, who said to his parents "Well, I made a few poor choices." Poor choices, indeed.

The soft peddling of a deadly sin by calling it merely a "poor choice" is a mindset which we also choose. We choose to think that way, which is a bad choice, because it can inhibit, even prevent the kind of remorse which is at the heart of repentance.

For example, every year we struggle with some students who persist in choosing to violate the Honor Code which is endorsed and validated by President Hinckley and the Board of Trustees. BYU-Hawaii the is University of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Yet these students cheat on tests or use someone else's paper to hand in as their own, or tear pages out of books in the library, or bully their roommates who are smaller than they are, or clock in to work and then run to do personal errands, or steal a book from the bookstore, take money from a roommate, drink a little beer, or a lot of kava. These are not just "poor choices," they are sins. This is iniquity, not just because they are wrong, which they are, but because we promised on our word of honor before we came to campus that we will not do these things.

The temptation is to enjoy a little indulgence, relieve a little pressure, satisfy a little pride, get ahead without putting in the work, or to get out of a hole we have dug ourselves into. No big deal, we say. Yet Satan laughs, a worm for a wing feather. The problem is that all these "poor choices" of dishonesty, added up, affect the character and create a habit of dishonesty. This habit programs us almost automatically to be dishonest, so that we lose both the desire and the power to choose honesty. We lose the freedom to be honest.

The dress and grooming part of the Honor Code is still hard for some students to follow, and hard for some faculty, staff, administrators, and students to enforce. All of this has to do with choices, the exercise of our agency, which again is based on attitude and honesty. Boys who let their hair hang over their ears and collar, sport a little tuft of beard under the lip or chin or let their baggy pants hang low almost to the "fall off" position.

Or girls who wear blouses and pants so tight they are all exposed and can hardly breathe, or their cleavage shows, or their tummy shows every time they shrug their shoulders. In many cases they don't even have to raise their arms. A member of the community emailed me last year complaining about all the Brittany Spears who claim to be students at BYU-Hawaii. I had to ask who Brittany Spears was, and was told the name is synonymous with a style of clothing, the exaggerated hip huggers and exposed midriffs in violation of Church standards of modesty and the BYU-Hawaii Honor Code. These are all matters of choice. Clothes are not forced upon you. When you choose your clothes, brothers and sisters, you have a choice. You may offer a wing feather for a worm, satisfying a little pride, vanity, and indulgence, thinking you're a little more attractive, a little more appealing, just like the skylark in the fable. But the loss of the wing feather, one after another, can lead you to disaster, including the loss of the privilege or freedom to attend school, the freedom to enjoy chaste associations with young men and women from around the world.

The required Church attendance as a condition for a bishop's endorsement to stay in school still bothers some students. Years ago, an irritated student wrote me the question, "Isn't forcing LDS students to attend Church as a requirement for staying in school parallel to Satan's plan of forcing salvation upon the children of men?"

My answer to this question is, "No, I see no parallel between Satan's plan to force adherence and the attendance requirement at BYU-Hawaii. If Satan were in charge, according to his plan, he would force you to apply to BYU-Hawaii, make you pay your money, and drag you kicking and screaming to campus. Once he had you here, he would say, "Don't worry, be happy, everybody's going to graduate." Guilt would be banned and so would merit, not one student would leave the school, not one would drop out, not one would be lost whether he liked it or not. That's how Satan would do it. Those who serve Satan often know him least. He never delivers on his promises for happiness or joy or freedom. It's always a worm for a wing feather. Those who exercise their free agency and choose Satan's way are least free of all. In fact, they're in bondage. Chains and cages, not freedom and fresh air, are in store for those who choose Satan, even at the very moment they are claiming their right to choose their own path.

Pornography is the perfect example of how wing feathers are exchanged for worms. The chemistry of human sexuality being what it is, it is categorically impossible to indulge in pornography without ending up quickly in

a mental cage. Indulgence in this insidious mental and spiritual disease, as President Hinckley calls it, will strip you faster than anything I know of the ability to sing and soar in the freedom of conscience.

Minds possessed of the images of pornography no longer have the freedom to think pure thoughts. Those images will crowd in and encumber and pollute your thoughts and conversations even at the point when you desperately want them to be gone. They take over. You cannot command them away, whether you are on your knees in private prayer, at the sacrament table, or even in a normal conversation with members of the opposite sex. Satan, author and master, by offering what he claims to be harmless entertainment, now holds the individual captive.

Many times pornography behaves like the insidious creeping of glaucoma rather than the overt enticement of a worm for a wing feather. That is, we don't leap immediately to the hard core sites on the internet or buy the X-rated books and films. Yet we allow ourselves to spend hours watching sitcoms and talk shows that are filled with allusions, dirty stories, jokes, and put downs of virtue.

Like glaucoma that is not diagnosed or treated, this kind of soft, snide, cynical attitude toward sexual purity will all of a sudden create a crisis where there is blindness to things of the Spirit, things transcendent and eternal. And this blindness will lead also to the same mental and emotional cage that I've just described.

We give wing feathers for worms in many other settings. An applicant desperate for a job misrepresents himself on a resume. A professional who will deliberately take credit for some good thing he did not do; a jealous rival deliberately demeaning or diminishing the accomplishments of another. The person who has perfected the art of complaining or making demands in situations where ordinary good people will always give in; the passing on of gossip with embellishments to be popular with the in-group. The inevitable temptation to mount the scorner's seat and cultivate the skill of the perfect squelch or the devastating retort. Like the young lady whose marriage fell apart, who told me she was first attracted to her husband because of his incisive wit. His amazing put down humor made him fun on a date. In their marriage, however, it became an unbearable burden, a technique of devastating emotional abuse.

Brothers and sisters, all of these things have to do with choices, choices that lift the soul to sing and soar in freedom and love, with confidence in the presence of the Lord. Or the choices can lead ever so silently, ever so carefully to the cage, an imprisonment where we are no longer free to avoid the consequences of our choices.

Having said all of this, I want to testify that through Jesus Christ, as King Benjamin so eloquently taught, we can become free again from the bondage of sin and sorrow. That is the great hope, that is the good news, but we must always remember that we must choose Him. He has already chosen us and died for us. We must choose Him and reject with all of our hearts the smiling temptations that remove quietly and stealthily the wing feathers of our morality.

I also want to say how inspiring and uplifting it is to see the vast majority of our students making right choices. Young men and women who are faithful in their callings, conscientious in the classroom and on the job. Who are tender and kind to each other and who say no to fun until their assignments are completed. The girl who longs to be liked and validated by young men but who refuses to compromise her standards. Men who honor virtuous womanhood as they honor their priesthood. These are young men and women who live and breathe this verity; there is no greater masterpiece in God's creation than virtuous, faithful youth, whose wing feathers are intact, which will bear them over and through the trials of mortality even unto eternal life.

One important principle about agency and making right choices is that these choices should be made long before the temptation confronts them to do otherwise. For example, a person's choice to be chaste, regardless of the circumstances, should be made long before the temptation surrounds him or her. In addition to this fact, I have

seen over and over again that the most effective way to escape temptation and danger, whether it is a sexual temptation or an angry confrontation, is to simply stand up and walk away. No fuss, no argument, no tears, no explanation, no parting farewells, just "I'm out of here."

The late Elder Marvin J. Ashton talked to a young audience about this very thing, to get out even if you have to walk 50 miles to get home. Remarkably, months after Elder Ashton spoke those words he and Sister Ashton actually met a person who was acting on his counsel. Coming down from their mountain cabin, the Ashtons were surprised to encounter this young woman walking toward the main highway. It was late evening. The Ashtons stopped to inquire if they could help. Among other things, the conversation went something like this.

"Where are you going?" asked the Apostle.

"To Salt Lake City." Answered the girl.

"Walking all the way? Salt Lake City is 50 miles away."

"If I have to," said the girl.

"Could we give you a ride," offered Elder Ashton.

Recognizing the Apostle of the Church, the young lady got into the car. As they traveled along, she told them she was doing what she heard him say to do in a situation that would compromise her standards and endanger her own chastity and self-respect. Apparently a young man she was attracted to had invited her to what she thought was a fun get together in the mountains with a bunch of good young men and women. She assumed there would be safety in numbers, but when she got there she discovered there seemed to be a pairing off into different rooms. Her date indicated she would stay with him. When she resisted, considerable social pressure was brought to bear on her to give in, including her date's refusal to leave the party and take her home. So she 'stood up, and walked away" , determined to walk all the way home if she had to.

There is another choice which in our particular environment we must all make, and that is to avoid and abstain from the abusive drinking of kava. Kava is a drink made of the root of the kava plant, common throughout Polynesia. Kava parties have become popular in some areas of the community and our students are often invited to join, nearly always to their great detriment. This kind of kava drinking is in violation of the Honor Code.

Over the years I have known students who lost nearly everything because of kava and the environment in which it is mixed and drunk. They lost the ability to succeed in school, to perform on the job; lost their families, their virtue, and their future.

Traditionally, kava was a symbol of solidarity and mutual support among Polynesian people. In Tonga, for example, the kava circle was a place of instruction, planning, education, the passing on of traditions and important life principles. It was a place of reconciliation and forgiveness. The kava circle anciently was where a newly married couple made their covenant of marriage public. In fact, fuakava, the Tongan word for "covenant" comes from the image of the couple receiving their first kava together in the kava ceremony which seals their marriage.

Today, however, there has been a mutation of tradition which, according to Brother Cy Bridges of the Polynesian Cultural Center, is an insult and a put down of true culture. That is, the kava party has become more like a pub or a bar for heavy drinking of thickly mixed kava and questionable conversation. Stake presidents and bishops and many wives can testify that it consumes the time, the attention, the energy and the money of

many people. Individuals and families suffer. The kava party is a place where the wing feathers of morality and goodness can be stripped away through indulgence and vanity.

Now you wonderful students, faculty, and staff let me express the confidence of the Brethren, the Board of Trustees in you and in this place. With all of my heart I pray that in this special environment, this enclave of wonderful possibilities for righteousness, which is BYU-Hawaii, that all of our choices will be noble and righteous ones. I pray that these choices will be right because our vision is clear and our hearts are pure. I express Sister Shumway's and my love to you and to all of our colleagues. We thank you for your love and support and for your patience with us in our weakness. I pray that the testimony of Jesus Christ and his Church will burn in our hearts and drive our choices in all that we do. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.