

10-16-2002

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Recommended Citation

Morrison, Alexander B., "The Challenge: Basing Your Career on Principles" (2002). *Vol. 1: Answering God's Interrogatories*. Paper 14.
http://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/life_law_vol1/14

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The Challenge: Basing Your Career on Principles

Alexander B. Morrison

In their best-selling book of a few years ago, entitled *In Search of Excellence*, Peters and Waterman point out that the greatest fear people have is not that they will die—it is not the fear of separation from loved ones, or even of extinction—but the fear that life will not have mattered, that its struggles and triumphs, tears, and laughter will all have been in vain.¹

In the cynical world in which we live, confronted each day as we are by “man’s inhumanity to man,” by the cruelty and indifference of much of human existence, it seems to many that life does indeed have little meaning.

We live in a society saturated with self-absorption, which promotes and rewards excessive materialism, mocks and derides moral principles, and worships secularism. Increasingly, Western society is bereft of the enduring virtue of honor, of which Pericles, the great Athenian statesman, said two and a half millennia ago: “For it is love of honor that never grows old; and honor it is, not gain, as some would have it, that rejoices the heart of age and helplessness.”

Faced with the wintry reality of life, with all its contradictions and imperfections, cruelty and injustice, one can feel some sympathy for those who, in their despair, proclaim that life is but a hollow charade, an obscene joke, or, in the words of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, “a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more . . . a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”²

But I must tell you in the strongest possible terms that those who feel like that are wrong, tragically and terribly so. “Men are, that they might have joy,” the scriptures tell us (2 Nephi 2:25). Our task is to fulfill the

measure of that destiny by tasting the sweetness of the joy the Lord wishes for us. As we do so, the scales of cynicism, pride, indifference, and disregard for others will fall away from our eyes, and we will begin to see who we are and what God expects us to do with our lives.

My only wish today is to help contribute to your search for understanding. I have no quick-fix “do-it-yourself” recipe book to offer—only a few principles that are well worn but proven. As we apply basic principles, we gain a perspective of things as they really are. We see in life’s challenges opportunities to serve.

The darkness of night portends the dawning of a new and better day. The greatest Englishman of this century, Winston Churchill, knew of the opportunities to serve during difficult days when he spoke at Harrow School in October of 1941. He said:

Do not let us speak of darker days; let us speak rather of sterner days. These are not dark days: these are great days—the greatest days our country has ever lived; and we must all thank God that we have been allowed, each of us according to our stations, to play a part in making these days memorable in the history of our race.

I group my advice under several headings: prepare yourselves temporally and spiritually, and see that preparation as one grand eternal round; set your priorities straight; learn the spirit of service and the joy of work; and let devotion to duty and honor be the hallmarks of your life.

Prepare Yourself Temporally and Spiritually

If you are to serve yourself, your family, community, country, and church properly; if you are to be your brother’s keeper in the sense that you accept your measure of responsibility for others, you must be prepared. You cannot contribute if you don’t have the skills and knowledge to do so. Sincerity will not suffice and goodwill will not win. Consider Winston Churchill’s words as he described the day he became prime minister on May 10, 1940. If ever there was a time for action and not for preparation, that was it. The French army was collapsing piecemeal before the ferocious fury of the German blitzkrieg. Britain stood alone, nearly defenseless. There was serious doubt the British Expeditionary Force could be saved. Churchill said of that day:

As I went to bed at about 3:00 a.m., I was conscious of a profound feeling of relief. At last I had authority to give direction over the whole scene, and I felt as though I were walking with destiny, that my past life had been a preparation for this honor, for this trial. I could not be reproached, either for having made the war or for lack of preparation for it, and yet I felt I knew a good deal about it and I was sure I would not fail.

He was prepared! No preparation can occur in the absence of work. What the world mistakes for genius is, as Edison pointed out, 90 percent perspiration and 10 percent inspiration. If you wish to serve, prepare yourself through study, work, and faith.

As you struggle to learn and relearn in the intellectually demanding field of the law, I urge you to cultivate a flexibility of attitude, a willingness to venture into fields not yet cultivated by you, a catholicity of interest that sees all learning as interrelated. You must make learning an eternal quest. If I may be permitted a personal comment, the chance to learn is to me one of the greatest privileges of life and one of the great attractions and fascinations of the restored gospel. Indeed, two doctrines of the Church attracted me as a young university student in Edmonton nearly half a century ago: eternal marriage and eternal progression. I remain grateful for them and perhaps more knowledgeable about their importance now than I was as a callow youth.

President Spencer W. Kimball encouraged us to lengthen our stride. That advice applies in the temporal realm as much as in the spiritual. Learn to stretch your mind, to reach a little further each day in testing the limits of your intellectual capacity. We are told that most of us use less than 25 percent of our intellectual abilities. We can all do much more than we now do. That stretching may be painful. It will certainly be exhausting. But it is ever so exhilarating. Indeed, it is intoxicating! Make it a lifelong habit to flex and stretch your intellectual muscles.

There is a Chinese proverb that states:

To live and not to learn is not living;

To learn and not to understand is not learning;

To understand and not to do is not understanding.

Seek to understand. Develop and retain an eternal curiosity. Some of you may remember Merlin's advice to King Arthur:

The best thing for being sad . . . is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then: to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you.³

In a few words: Seek always to learn!

Get Your Priorities Straight

Several years ago President David O. McKay in speaking to a group of Church employees put into perspective what we should concentrate on in our lives. He said:

Let me assure you, Brethren, that someday you will have a personal priesthood interview with the Savior himself. If you are interested, I will tell you the order in which he will ask you to account for your earthly responsibilities.

First, he will request an accountability report about your relationship with your wife. Have you actively been engaged in making her happy and ensuring that her needs have been met as an individual?

Second, he will want an accountability report about each of your children individually. He will not attempt to have this for simply a family stewardship but will request information about your relationship to each and every child.

Third, he will want to know what you personally have done with the talents you were given in the preexistence.

Fourth, he will want a summary of your activity in your Church assignments. He will not be necessarily interested in what assignments you have had, for in his eyes the home teacher and a mission president are probably equals, but he will request a summary of how you have been of service to your fellow man in your Church assignments.

Fifth, he will have no interest in how you earned your living but if you were honest in all your dealings.

Sixth, he will ask for an accountability on what you have done to contribute in a positive manner to your community, state, country, and the world.⁴

You will note that the Lord puts first emphasis on family—your relationships with spouse and children. He is certainly less interested in how you earn your living, though He is most concerned whether you are honest in your dealings. Whatever else you do, provide time for your family. If you are as busy and active as you should be, it will not always be easy to do so. Sometimes you will not get it right (at least I certainly haven't), but keep on trying. Call down the powers of heaven to help you in your struggle. I promise you the needed assistance will be yours.

“It takes more nobility of character,” Steven Covey has said, “to do whatever is necessary to build that one relationship [the family] than to labor diligently and faithfully for the many others outside it.”

One of the great tragedies of life is to observe men—and increasingly women—who struggle up the ladder of their careers, perhaps, though certainly not necessarily, over the backs of colleagues, and in the process, through carelessness, neglect, or selfishness, lose their families. They divorce their spouse, from whom, in the euphemism of the day, they claim to have “grown apart” in their search for “personal fulfillment,” whatever that is. Their children drift away, finding no warmth, no giving, no help, no

understanding, and then, perhaps in the twilight of their lives, these gray husks of men find that all they've done has turned to ashes. The ladder up which they climbed was leaning against the wrong wall. It led not to light and joy but to darkness of mind and spirit.

It need not be so. Many there are whose lives are tributes to the happiness that comes from commitments made and renewed daily. President Gordon B. Hinckley tells a sweet and loving story that illustrates, far better than I could, the strength and joy that come from having proper priorities in life. He relates the following:

I think of two friends from my high school and university years. He was a boy from a country town, plain in appearance, without money or apparent promise. He had grown up on a farm, and if he had any quality that was attractive it was the capacity to work. He carried bologna sandwiches in a brown paper bag for his lunch and swept the school floors to pay his tuition. But with all of his rustic appearance, he had a smile and a personality that seemed to sing of goodness. She was a city girl who had come out of a comfortable home. She would not have won a beauty contest, but she was wholesome in her decency and integrity and attractive in her decorum and dress.

Something wonderful took place between them. They fell in love. Some whispered that there were far more promising boys for her, and a gossip or two noted that perhaps other girls might have interested him. But these two laughed and danced and studied together through their school years. They married when people wondered how they could ever earn enough to stay alive. He struggled through his professional school and came out well in his class. She scrimped and saved and worked and prayed. She encouraged and sustained, and when things were really tough, she said quietly, "Somehow we can make it." Buoyed by her faith in him, he kept going through these difficult years. Children came, and together they loved them and nourished them and gave them the security that came of their own love for and loyalty to one another. Now many years have passed. Their children are grown, a lasting credit to them, to the Church, and to the communities in which they live. . . .

. . . Forty-five years earlier people without understanding had asked what they saw in each other. . . . Their friends of those days saw only a farm boy from the country and a smiling girl with freckles on her nose. But these two found in each other love and loyalty, peace and faith in the future.

There was a flowering in them of something divine, planted there by that Father who is our God. In their school days they had lived worthy of that flowering of love. They had lived with virtue and faith, with appreciation and respect for self and one another. In the years of difficult professional and economic struggles, they had found their greatest earthly strength in their companionship. Now in mature age, they were finding peace and quiet satisfaction together. Beyond all this, they were assured of an eternity of joyful association through priesthood covenants long since made and promises long since given in the House of the Lord.⁵

Having prepared yourself, or, more accurately, having begun the eternal task of preparing yourself, go forth to serve, expressing always the joy of work, seeing it as a spiritual necessity as well as a temporal imperative. As you do so, I admonish you to keep ever in your mind these inspired words of King Benjamin: “I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath” (Mosiah 4:26).

We lighten Christ’s yoke as we accept some of the burdens of others, as we help them to have hope rather than dark despair, as we apply a healing balm of Gilead to their scarified, suffering souls.

A few years ago the *Wall Street Journal* recounted a heartwarming tale of suffering, compassion, and Christlike service.⁶ Some 20 years ago, Dr. Ian Jackson, a world-famous craniofacial surgeon, was on a charity mission from his native Scotland to Peru. There he met David Lopez, a tiny Indian boy, just two years old, who had virtually no face at all. A gaping hole covered the areas where his mouth and nose should have been. There were no upper teeth or upper jaw. To drink, David simply tilted back his head and poured the liquid straight down. His lower teeth could actually touch his forehead. Most of David’s face had literally been eaten away by a terrible parasitic disease called leishmaniasis.

Relief workers begged Dr. Jackson to help. He was leaving for Scotland the next day, but he agreed to try to rebuild David’s face if the boy could come to Scotland. Eventually a way was found, and the Jacksons went to Glasgow Airport to pick up David. As he walked down the ramp, they saw a tiny boy wearing scuffed white boots and a hand-knit poncho. A woolen cap was pulled so low on his head that only his big brown eyes and the round hole beneath them were visible. The Jacksons took David into their home and into their hearts. There followed long years of surgery—more than 80 operations in all—as Dr. Jackson attempted to give David a new face. All of the doctor’s services were donated. Each summer, as other children played, David would be in the hospital, his head swathed in bandages.

The painstaking, pioneer surgical efforts to rebuild David’s face went on for 15 years. Today David looks like a young man who has been in a serious automobile accident, but he is well adjusted and fully functional. He used to be teased and tormented about his looks, but over the years, that has died away.

The Jacksons now live in the United States, where Dr. Jackson continues to be one of the leading craniofacial surgeons in the world. In 1982 Mrs. Jackson flew to Peru to try to find David’s parents. After a long journey downriver from a remote Catholic mission, David’s father was found. He explained that the boy had been born healthy, but when he developed leishmaniasis after having been bitten by an infected sandfly, he was taken to the mission to seek treatment. The father gave permission to the

Jacksons—who had developed a deep love for David—to adopt him as their own. Since 1984 David Lopez has been David Jackson.

I don't know whether Dr. Jackson is a Christian or not. But I do know he is doing God's work. "When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God" (Mosiah 2:17).

As we lose our lives in compassionate service to others, we develop a deeper understanding of our dependence on God. I return again to the wisdom of King Benjamin: "And now, if God, who has created you, on whom you are dependent for your lives and for all that ye have and are, doth grant unto you whatsoever ye ask that is right, in faith, believing that ye shall receive, O then, how ye ought to impart of the substance that ye have one to another" (Mosiah 4:21). Said faithful Nephi, "I know in whom I have trusted. My God hath been my support; he hath led me through mine afflictions in the wilderness; and he hath preserved me upon the waters of the great deep. He hath filled me with his love, even unto the consuming of my flesh. . . . Behold, he hath heard my cry by day, and he hath given me knowledge by visions in the nighttime. . . . And upon the wings of his Spirit hath my body been carried away. . . . I will trust in thee forever" (2 Nephi 4:19–21, 23, 25, 34).

Now of course you can't do all that needs to be done to help change this world, but you can do your best and hope that others will follow.

As you strive to serve others, I urge you to look beyond those who are your clients. They deserve your very best, of course, but your concern must not stop with them. You must look to the broader community in which you live and work. Voluntary service to others will be an increasingly significant characteristic of caring communities in the new millennium. It takes many forms, including work in your church, neighborhood schools, and professional and service organizations and assistance to the disadvantaged—the poor, children, immigrants, etc. In Utah, lawyers are being encouraged by Legal Services, the Disability Law Center, and the Legal Aid Society to donate each year the monetary equivalent of two billable hours to provide free legal services to those in need. The Church has announced that if the drive to do so raises \$300,000, it will donate an additional \$100,000.⁷ I commend that sort of initiative to you, tailored, of course, to fit the needs of your own community.

It will take both courage and commitment if you are to help change the world as it must be changed. Do not lose your idealism. Do not slip into the sophisticated cynicism of those who sell their moral integrity for this world's goods. Do not become so tied to your mortgage payments, career ambitions, company loyalties, or professional associations that you become afraid or unwilling to search for the truth and to speak out in its defense. Corporate greed, bureaucratic empire-building, and political venality all flourish because otherwise good men and women are unwilling to say no to

what they recognize in their hearts is wrong. “I was only obeying orders,” they say. “You can’t fight City Hall.” Of such is born the moral outrage of our time. In less spectacular fashion, but of equal importance, such a decline in commitment to moral integrity leads to an indifferent, almost passive acceptance of the myriad of minor corruptions of our society.

The demands of the future relate not only to man’s physical needs but to all of the dimensions of human existence. It is ironic that the rise of materialism has resulted in a decline in the quality of man’s spiritual life. This potentially fatal imbalance can only be redressed if we begin to pay proper attention not only to the things that are Caesar’s but also to those that are God’s (see Matthew 22:21). Man obviously needs food, shelter, clothing, clean water, education, and health care. But he also needs love and hope and those other attributes of the spirit that collectively contribute to the quality of life. In Teilhard de Chardin’s words, we must seek for a future “consisting not merely of successive years but of higher states.”⁸ The current witless pursuit of materialism bears within it the seeds of death for industrial societies and perhaps for the world as we know it. We must move beyond a unidimensional view of man to consider all that is needed to give meaning and value to life, all that contributes to the formation of the whole man.

Let Devotion to Duty and Honor Be Your Hallmarks

There will be opportunities—some blatant, some seductive—for you to lose your integrity every day. The adversary will see to that. It may be the lure of compromising your principles of honesty: the chance to make a somewhat soiled dollar in a somewhat shady deal. Or it may be the temptation to break one of the other moral laws: to lie a little, cheat a little, or be a little dishonest, to have just one drink, or to be unfaithful to your spouse just once. Almost always the temptation will come wrapped in glitter and gloss, dressed up to look like what it is not, the devil’s counterfeit. And to the extent you succumb you will be weakened and deprived of your manhood or womanhood. The work of the Lord will be impeded, and the Devil will laugh. Conversely, as you rise above temptation, you will grow in spiritual stature and enjoy the approbation of good men and women everywhere. “Duty,” said the great Confederate military commander Robert E. Lee, “is the most sublime word in any language. Do your duty in all things. You cannot do more. You should not expect to do less.”⁹

Duty achieves its highest expression when carried out within the framework of and adherence to a firm set of moral standards. Many observers have commented on the slackening of moral fiber in the Western democracies over the past several decades. In his celebrated commencement address at Harvard a few years ago, Alexander Solzhenitsyn drew attention to the most outstanding weakness of the Western democracies: their growing

lack of courage. In Solzhenitsyn's view, this decline in courage is particularly striking among the ruling and intellectual elites. In part it may arise from having too many of this world's possessions, too easily come by. Those who remain courageous (and there are many) have little impact on public life.

"Political and intellectual functionaries," Solzhenitsyn continues, "exhibit depression, passivity, and perplexity in their actions and in their statements, and even more so in their self-seeking rationales as to how realistic, reasonable, and intellectually and even morally justified it is to base state policies on weakness and cowardice."¹⁰ Although Solzhenitsyn was referring primarily to political courage of the kind needed by national leaders, the courage of nations begins with the courage of individuals.

Courage is the great need of our time, courage to accept the ineluctable truth that greatness can never be achieved without adversity, that struggle is the prerequisite for growth. Edmund Burke taught this well when he said:

Adversity is a severe instructor, set over us by one who knows us better than we do ourselves, as He loves us better, too. He that wrestles with us strengthens our nerves and sharpens our skill. Our antagonist is our helper. This conflict with difficulty makes us acquainted with our object and compels us to consider it in all its relations. It will not suffer us to be superficial.¹¹

Yes, adversity is the refiner's fire that bends iron but tempers steel. It is in the fire of struggle and stress that greatness is forged. A measure of your greatness as men and women will be your response to adversity, the courage you have as you wrestle with problems that can strengthen your nerves and sharpen your skill, as Burke said.

Hastiness and superficiality have been termed the psychic disease of the 20th century. The pace of modern life, which seems to grow more frantic each year, penalizes thoroughness and promotes haste. Society demands speed—speed at all costs, speed regardless of the consequences to the health and happiness of individuals, speed at the expense of diminishing supplies of irreplaceable resources. We demand instant communication, ever more rapid means of transport, faster decisions. Business deals are conceived in Toronto, planned in Edmonton, and consummated in Vancouver or New York or Tokyo, all in a few hours time—but not without a price being paid. Often the price is tragically high: anxieties that must be calmed with tranquilizers or alcohol, children who grow up not knowing their father (or, increasingly, their mother), and lives spent in acquiring rather than giving.

It will take courage for you to step far enough away from the glamour and excitement of the speedway of life to see it for what much of it really is: a poor, tawdry counterfeit of what life can be. I for one am delighted to note that increasing numbers of people are doing just that, deciding that the game isn't worth the candle, and that there are more important things to do

in this world than to act like a speeded-up version of the Roadrunner. I can't tell any of you, nor would I wish to, what speed to run your life at. All I ask is that you be honest enough to take a hard look at what you really want and courageous enough to act on your decision, even if it means fewer material possessions and less worldly acclaim.

Finally, I remind you that the final stage in the development of an exceptional professional is that of teacher and mentor of the next generation—the young men and women just entering the profession and in need of the example and guidance of those who have already scaled the heights and who are the skilled practitioners of their craft. Law school provides the intellectual framework for the practice of law, but does little to actually teach students how to be lawyers. That is done as the new graduate learns the realities of practice at the knee of one who is more experienced.

Each generation has a solemn obligation to give a helping hand to those coming behind, who will in their turn be the carriers of the torch. A profession that loses that vision has at best an uncertain future.

The choice is clear: If you want to do more than exist, if you want to soar as on eagle's wings to the outermost limits of your potential as a human being, you must pay the price. That price is an amalgam of discipline and desire, lightened by hope and love, bound together by the steel hoops of work and service, tempered in adversity, undergirded by faith, and overlaid with courage. This is your challenge, and I send you forth to accept it.

This address was given to the Edmonton, Alberta Chapter of the J. Reuben Clark Law Society on February 26, 1999. Reprinted from the Clark Memorandum, Spring 1999, 32–39.

Alexander B. Morrison received his Ph.D. from Cornell University in 1956. He served as a member of the First and Second Quorums of the Seventy 1987–2000 and was named an emeritus General Authority in 2000.

Notes

1. See Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies* (New York: Warner Books, 1984), xxi, quoting Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: Free Press, 1975), 3–6, 51; and Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), 3–4. See also chapter 3 “Man Waiting for Motivation,” *In Search of Excellence*, 55–86.

2. *Macbeth*, 5:5.26–28.

3. T. H. White, *The Sword in the Stone*, 183.

4. Reported by Cloyd Hofheins in a talk to the seventies quorum of Provo Utah Oak Hills Stake, 16 May 1982, as quoted in Stephen R. Covey, *The Divine Center* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1982), 54–55.
5. Gordon B. Hinckley, “First Presidency Message: And The Greatest of These Is Love,” *Ensign* (March 1984): 3–4.
6. Neal Templin, “Look of Love: As His Face is Molded, Boy Finds His Surgeon Becoming His Father,” *Wall Street Journal*, 13 November 1992, A1, A16.
7. “Attorneys Dig Deep to Help Poor,” *Deseret News*, 27 January 1999, A12 (editorial). [Editors’ note: The drive was successful. See “Legal-Aid Campaign Reaches a Goal, Gets Matching Funds,” *Deseret News*, 1 September 1999, A11.]
8. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 192.
9. In John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1968), 620.
10. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, “A World Split Apart,” Commencement Address Delivered at Harvard University, 8 June 1978.
11. “Reflections on the Revolution in France,” in *Edmund Burke*, Harvard Classics, 50 vols. (1909), 24:299–300.