

“Learning is a Spiritual Endeavor”

Brian K. Ashton

Vice president of field of operations for BYU-Pathway Worldwide

I know what it means to struggle to learn. As a child, I tried to learn how to play the piano. However, it was so difficult for me and I was so bad at it that my piano teacher told my mother that she should let me quit. Later during my university studies, I tried to learn Mandarin Chinese. That proved so difficult that my professor eventually sent me for testing to see why I struggled so much. That testing revealed that I have difficulty hearing certain sounds that make learning to play music and speak foreign languages very hard for me.

Imagine my surprise and dismay when after my first year of university, I was called to serve a Spanish-speaking mission in Peru. Learning Spanish wasn't easy. I was the worst Spanish-speaker in my district at the Missionary Training Center. And it took me much longer than my missionary peers to learn Spanish. But today, with the Lord's help, I speak Spanish well.

I've often wondered why I was able to learn Spanish but was unable to learn to play the piano or how to speak Chinese. I've come to understand that I made learning to play the piano and speak Mandarin purely secular efforts—I didn't involve the Lord in my attempts to learn. However, with learning Spanish, I actively sought the Lord's help. Even though learning Spanish was extremely difficult for me, with God's help I was able to persist in the required effort, and I was able to overcome the issues that affected me in learning to play the piano and speak Mandarin.

Today, I'd like to talk with you about how you can overcome your own struggles to learn by obtaining God's help.¹

The scriptures and the words of the prophets teach us four principles that allow us to access God's help to learn.

The first principle is that all truth is made understandable to us by the Light of Christ and the Holy Ghost. In fact, Elder David A. Bednar has taught that, “The Holy Ghost is ... *the* teacher and witness of all truth.”²

The second principle is that, in order to learn truth, we must obey the laws that allow us to understand that principle of truth. The Lord taught, “when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated.”³ This means that if I want to learn algebra, I have to obey the laws upon which learning algebra are based.

The third principle is that God can quicken or increase our ability to understand or learn. Isaiah wrote that it was the Holy Ghost that made Jesus of “quick understanding.”⁴ Doctrine and Covenants Section 88 teaches that the Light of Christ is the light, “that quickeneth your understandings.”⁵

Finally, the fourth principle is that if we exercise faith in the Savior, we will “have power to do whatsoever thing is expedient in Christ.”⁶ I understand this to mean that when it is the Lord's will we can:

¹ For a more complete exploration of this topic, see Brian Ashton's BYU-Idaho devotional on Feb. 12, 2019

² David A. Bednar, “Seek Learning by Faith,” *Ensign*, Sept. 2007, 66

³ Doctrine and Covenants 130:21

⁴ Isaiah 11:2-3

⁵ Doctrine and Covenants 88:11

⁶ Moroni 7:33

- Overcome or work around challenges to our learning.
- Develop talents that don't come naturally to us (such as in my case, learning Spanish).
- And, persist in doing the things that allow us to learn even when it is very difficult.

Now with those principles in mind, what can you do to make your learning a spiritual endeavor? Here are five suggestions:

First, cultivate a desire to learn. The Lord grants unto us according to our desire.⁷ Wanting to learn something is usually necessary to accessing God's help. As a child, I didn't actually want to learn how to play the piano. As a result, I never asked for God's help.

Second, do the work, or in other words, obey the laws, required to learn. For example, if you want to learn algebra, you will have to read, listen, or watch an explanation of what it is and how to do it. You will have to ponder this explanation. And you will then have to practice solving problems. After doing these things, depending on how well you understand, you may also need to get tutoring or put in additional practice. I had to do a lot more work to learn Spanish than my peers, and sometimes you will too. Remember that when you have to put in extra work, the Lord can give you strength and time to do so.

Third, do the things that bring the Spirit into your life. Doctrine and Covenants 93 teaches that, "He that keepeth [God's] commandments receiveth truth and light until he is glorified in truth and *knoweth all things*."⁸ Thus as we repent and keep God's commandments, the Spirit will teach us truth and make it easier for us to learn. You can also pray (maybe even *plead*) daily for help in your studies. Don't just pray in generalities but pray to understand the specific principles with which you are struggling. Fast as necessary. Serve others. Attend the temple.

Fourth, "deny [yourself] of all ungodliness."⁹ When we do things that drive the Spirit from our lives, such as being disobedient, complaining about our studies, telling ourselves that learning something is impossible, or giving into our pride, Satan has power to take light and truth from us, including that light and truth that we are trying to obtain in our studies.¹⁰

And finally, trust that "with God all things are possible."¹¹ Don't give up because learning something seems impossible. Don't "take counsel from [y]our fears."¹² Rather, move forward in faith. If you can't see the solution to your problems now, believe that those solutions will come as you move forward if you are doing what God wants you to do.

I want to end with a story. Before he was called as an Apostle, the scientist John A. Widtsoe worked for years to develop a certain scientific formula. One day, he concluded that this was impossible. He decided to put this work away forever and to move on to another field of study. He then went home and, in order to console himself, took his wife to the temple. It was there in the temple that day that the solution came to him.¹³

⁷ See Alma 29:4

⁸ Doctrine and Covenants 93:28, emphasis added; see also Doctrine and Covenants 50:24

⁹ Moroni 10:32

¹⁰ See Doctrine and Covenants 93:39

¹¹ Matthew 19:26; Mark 10:27

¹² James E. Faust, "Be Not Afraid," *Ensign*, Oct. 2002, 6

¹³ John A. Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe* (1952), 177

I testify that as you make learning a spiritual endeavor, you too will find solutions to your learning challenges and be able to learn more efficiently and more effectively. I further testify that Jesus Christ is the source of all truth. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.