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Our Divine Nature and Life Decisions

CRAIG H. HART

I appreciate the opportunity to share this devotional hour with you and pray that what I have to say might be uplifting and meaningful in your lives. Leading into my topic on our divine nature and life decisions, I would like to briefly reminisce about a couple of my experiences as a BYU student. These might be applicable to some of you in the decisions that you are making.

It was 30 years ago this summer that my wife, Kerstine, and I first met at a family home evening group activity at the Smith Fieldhouse. As the weeks passed, Kerstine would mysteriously show up at my table at the Deseret Towers cafeteria whenever I was eating lunch, which was often at a different time each day. I quite liked that, but I wasn't really interested in pursuing anything serious until my elders quorum president pulled me aside one day. After listing off some of Kerstine's great qualities, he asked me to help him find a way to enjoy having lunch with her on a regular basis like I was doing. Suddenly I got very interested, and the rest is history.

Both of us well remember our first few months of marriage—we lived in a studio apartment south of campus that was tucked under Mexican and Italian restaurants and a

bakery. We have many interesting memories of the place, including the black, oozy slime that crept out of the shower drain each morning. Our oldest son, David, was conceived shortly after we were married. Morning sickness mixed with the smells wafting down from the eateries above made for particularly poignant memories. Much like now, it was a time of economic uncertainty. We started our lives together in the midst of long gas lines due to oil shortages, two back-to-back recessions, double-digit inflation, and double-digit interest rates. But we moved forward with our family in faith that all would work out.

At the time, I was teaching Japanese to missionaries at the MTC. Our rent was \$110 per month, including utilities. I was making about \$250 per month. So we were set—both of us attended BYU until complications with pregnancy and a premature baby postponed Kerstine's schooling until many years later.

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Like many of you now, I was seeking inspiration and struggling to decide what to major in and what career path I should pursue. It wasn't until I started taking child development and psychology classes from wonderful BYU faculty mentors that I discovered my academic passion, which led me to a research and university teaching career.

After nine years of postmarriage “camping out”—as some relatives used to call it—we left graduate school behind. It has been a fascinating journey over the past couple of decades as I've witnessed and been a part of the scientific enterprise in my discipline. New discoveries that have helped explain how the complex interplay between nature and nurture works to facilitate child and adolescent development for good and for ill have captivated my attention. Yet it is humbling to realize that studies in my discipline only capture a mortal millisecond of eternity in the lives of our Heavenly Father's children. Without an understanding of our spiritual personalities, which existed prior to mortal birth and eternal progression beyond mortality, secular knowledge about human development will always be limited.

Today I would like to focus on our spiritual personalities as essential parts of our eternal identities. Our divine nature stems from our premortal existence. Understanding who we are from an eternal perspective can help guide us in the decisions that we make every day. Let us first consider what has been revealed about our pre-earth life and our spiritual personalities.

The Premortal Existence and Our Spiritual Personalities

Every prophet since Joseph Smith has reiterated the reality of our premortal existence and the eternal identity of our spirits. This is illustrated in a statement by the First Presidency in 1912:

All people who come to this earth and are born in mortality, had a pre-existent, spiritual personality, as the sons and daughters of the Eternal Father. [Statement of the First Presidency, 31 January 1912, in “Editor's Table,” *Improvement Era*, March 1912, 417; also “Pre-Existent States,” 31 January 1912, in James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75), 4:264; see also Jeremiah 1:5]

This doctrine was highlighted more recently in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World”:

All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose. [*Ensign*, November 1995, 102]

Numerous biblical passages afford glimpses of our spiritual origins and eternal potential. For example, the Apostle Paul reminded us that “we are the offspring of God” (Acts 17:29; see also Romans 8:16) and that God is “the Father of spirits” (Hebrews 12:9; see also Ephesians 4:6).

Some years ago a colleague of mine, who was a devout member of another Christian denomination, was curious about our beliefs. As I answered questions that touched on the plan of salvation, we read together about the Apostle Paul, who stated on Mars Hill in Athens that “we are the offspring of God.” After a moment of reflection, he asked, “Do you realize the implications of these passages?”

I thought I did, but I soon realized he had picked up on something quite profound.

He said, “It looks like the Apostle Paul is addressing nonmembers of the Church here and referring to them as the literal offspring

of God. I have always thought of ‘children of God’ as only referring to those who accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, but this makes me wonder if there isn’t more to this.”

Although he declined my invitation to meet with the full-time missionaries, he did do considerable research on his own and concluded that the doctrine of the premortal existence had once been part of his religious tradition and that of many others. This actually made him more committed to his own faith. I learned from him, and later confirmed on my own, that the doctrine of a premortal existence was a common theme that was widely taught and written about by early Christian theologians and scholars until a council in A.D. 543, when it was branded as heresy (see Brent L. Top, *The Life Before* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988], 15–19).

How blessed we are to have this plain and precious truth not only restored in our day but also elaborated upon by modern revelation in ways that provide direction and meaning to our lives as we consider our divine nature and destiny.

Gender as Part of Our Eternal Identity

Gender is also an essential characteristic that originated in the premortal realm. President Boyd K. Packer reminded us:

*The scriptures and the teachings of the Apostles and prophets speak of us in premortal life as sons and daughters, spirit children of God. Gender existed before, and did not begin at mortal birth. [Boyd K. Packer, “For Time and All Eternity,” *Ensign*, November 1993, 21]*

President Packer also encouraged us to

*be careful lest you unknowingly foster influences and activities which tend to erase the masculine and feminine differences nature has established. [Boyd K. Packer, “The Relief Society,” *Ensign*, May 1998, 73]*

The origin of gender is a heatedly debated topic in my discipline. Competing theories and research abound that attempt to explain gender origins; they focus on the extent to which they are modifiable, socially constructed, biologically driven, or all of the above. We are blessed with a secure knowledge that gender is a vital part of our eternal identity and purpose. As I contrast this with the confusion and inconclusiveness of the secular data at hand, I am grateful for our understanding of the divine role that gender plays in our eternal progression.

Decisions and Experiences in Premortality

As in our mortal existence, we had opportunities to obtain knowledge, to progress, and to make eternally defining decisions in premortality (see Luke 10:18; Jude 1:6; Revelation 12:7; Isaiah 14:12–13). We participated in the Council in Heaven, learned of our Heavenly Father’s eternal plan for our destiny, progressed as far as we could without a physical body and mortal experiences, and chose to prove our willingness to keep God’s commandments while in a mortal state where there would be no recollection of our premortal experiences. We also learned that our Heavenly Father would provide a Savior so that we could overcome sin and death (see 2 Nephi 9:19–24). Because we are here upon this earth, we kept our first estate. You and I made the decision to follow our Heavenly Father’s plan rather than give heed to Satan’s plan, which would have resulted in an inability to make choices for ourselves and to learn from our own experiences (see Dallin H. Oaks, “The Great Plan of Happiness,” *Ensign*, November 1993, 72–75).

Premortal Influences in Mortality

As we will contemplate shortly, knowledge of our eternal identity and the decisions we made in premortality can help us make wise choices in our mortal existence.

We also had the opportunity in premortality to develop many talents and abilities that can

play an important role in our mortal existence. Consider the following statements:

*Being subject to law, and having their agency, all the spirits of men, while yet in the Eternal Presence, developed aptitudes, talents, capacities, and abilities of every sort, kind, and degree. During the long expanse of life which then was, an infinite variety of talents and abilities came into being. [Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah: From Bethlehem to Calvary*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979–81), 1:23]*

*Notwithstanding this fact that our recollection of former things was taken away, the character of our lives in the spirit world has much to do with our disposition, desires and mentality here in mortal life. This spirit influences the body to a great extent, just as the body in its desires and cravings has an influence on the spirit. . . . Environment and many other causes, however, have great influence on the progress and destiny of man, but we must not lose sight of the fact that the characteristics of the spirit which were developed through many ages of a former existence play a very important part in our progression through mortal life. [Joseph Fielding Smith, “Is Man Immortal?” part 3, *Improvement Era*, March 1916, 426]*

In this regard, I often think of Cain, whom the scriptures refer to in Moses as one who was a rebel, a liar, and an associate of Lucifer in the premortal existence (see *The Mortal Messiah*, 23). He was even called “Perdition” from before the world (Moses 5:24). Yet somehow he managed to make good choices that helped him attain mortal birth, and he even began his time in mortality being obedient to the laws of God. Unfortunately, despite the righteous teachings of Adam, he later rebelled and slew Abel (see Bruce R. McConkie, *MD*, s.v. “Cain,” 108–9). We can only speculate as to what might have happened to entice him back to his former proclivities.

Alternatively, the scriptures teach that there were many “noble and great ones” who were good from before the world (Abraham 3:22–23). Nephi was likely one of those valiant ones who exercised his agency in responsible ways. He had “great desires to know of the mysteries of God [and] did not rebel against” his father, as his brethren Laman and Lemuel did (1 Nephi 2:16). Yet all three brothers were “born of goodly parents” (1 Nephi 1:1).

Although we cannot speculate as to the reasons why things played out the way they did for these more and less valiant spirits in mortality, we have a unique opportunity to learn things about ourselves from our premortal decisions and predispositions. Patriarchal blessings can guide our life decisions and often provide glimpses into premortal aspects of our existence in ways that can provide warnings, admonitions, and guidance about our gifts and talents that can bless our lives and those around us.

In mortality every person is endowed with spiritual gifts and talents that are part of their divine nature that can be refined, developed, and enlarged as a result of earthly experiences (see D&C 46; Moroni 10; 1 Corinthians 12–14). Everyone also has characteristics that are less than complete, as reflected in our lack of aptitude and talent in some areas. We learn in Ether that weaknesses can foster humility and that weak things can become strong if individuals humble themselves and have faith in God (see Ether 12:17–27). Strengths and weaknesses can serve to provide unique learning experiences, depending on the circumstances individuals find themselves in and the extent to which opportunities are availed.

I received my mission call during a time when prospective missionaries had to take a language aptitude test. When my stake president saw my score, he laughed and said, “You won’t have to worry about going on a foreign mission. I have never seen such a low score.”

Imagine my surprise when the call to Japan came. I didn't even know where it was on the map! Learning Japanese was the hardest thing I had ever done. Yet, as many of you have experienced, the Lord miraculously prepared a way. And it wasn't long before I knew exactly why I had been sent there. Those language skills, the cultural experience, and the converts I worked with have been blessings in my life to this day.

Regardless of our talents and abilities (or the lack thereof), all individuals also have both goodness and fleshly susceptibilities within them. President David O. McKay summarized the nature of humankind:

Man has a dual nature; one, related to the earthly or animal life; the other, akin to the divine. [CR, April 1949, 13; see also McKay, GI, 347]

Before baptism and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, all receive the Light of Christ to discern good from evil (see Moroni 7:15–19). We come from the heavenly realm and are born into a world of sin beset with temptations for the “natural man” but also full of spiritual opportunities for growth for the divine (see Mosiah 3:19; 16:5). Being born innocent (see D&C 93:38) is being born neither good nor evil but having the potential for both. The natural man in us grows as a result of sin and our rejection of the promptings of the Spirit, whereas our divine nature is manifest when we heed those spiritual promptings and reject sin (see Mosiah 5:2).

There has been much to contemplate so far today. To review, we lived in a premortal existence as spirit sons and daughters of heavenly parents. While there, we had opportunities to develop talents, obtain knowledge, and make decisions that play important roles in our mortal existence. In mortality, everyone is endowed with spiritual gifts and talents that are part of our divine natures as well as with opportunities to develop characteristics

that are less than complete. We are also born innocent, with the potential to engage in both good and evil, depending on our choices in mortality.

Mortal Decision Making

Let's now further consider mortal decision-making opportunities that are part of this mortal experience. As with our premortal existence, our mortal schooling is replete with opportunities to make choices that will either turn us toward or take us away from our divine destiny in our heavenly home. In the Book of Mormon, King Benjamin reminded us: “Watch yourselves, and your thoughts, and your words, and your deeds, and observe the commandments of God, and continue in the faith [so that you] perish not” (Mosiah 4:30).

We need to be vigilant and avoid making poor choices that can take us down forbidden paths. Remembering who we are as spirit children of God and all that that means can be helpful. Some good choices are easy to make if we have made firm decisions in accordance with our eternal values in advance.

Several years ago, after attending professional meetings in Europe, I had the pleasure of being bumped to first class on a flight from Paris to the United States. It was an entirely different world from what I normally experience. As I was enjoying the legroom and reclining in luxury, the flight attendants kept bringing wonderful dishes and offering wine to go along with them.

After I had declined the wine for about the third time, a flight attendant came up behind me, leaned down close to my ear, and teasingly said, “Mr. Hart, no one will ever know.”

Shocked out of my blissful state, and wondering what she knew about me and how, I simply said, “Well, I would know, you would know, and”—pointing overhead—“most important, He would know.”

She said, “Got it,” and brought more fruit juice instead. That was an easy choice to make.

The right choices in other areas are often more difficult to discern, particularly when the choices are between several good options, like what academic major to pursue. And some choices are more pertinent to our salvation than others. For example, who we choose to marry is far more critical than what type of car we decide to buy.

We need not be left alone in the decisions that we make—big or small—in our mortal schooling experience. President Ezra Taft Benson explained:

Usually the Lord gives us the overall objectives to be accomplished and some guidelines to follow, but he expects us to work out most of the details and methods. The methods and procedures are usually developed through study and prayer and by living so that we can obtain and follow the promptings of the Spirit. [Ezra Taft Benson, CR, April 1965, 121; also in Benson, *God, Family, Country: Our Three Great Loyalties* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 381]

Spiritual, Genetic, and Environmental Factors

As illustrated by many scriptural examples, including that of Lehi’s family, it is interesting in mortality to observe that not all children respond similarly to parental or other environmental influences. Part of this may be due to spiritual predispositions, as noted earlier. In terms of adhering to gospel teachings, we see considerable variation in how individuals respond to spiritual influences in this mortal existence. President Brigham Young noted this when he said:

Some spirits are more noble than others; some are capable of receiving more than others. There is the same variety in the spirit world that you behold here, yet they are of the same parentage, of one Father, one God. [JD 4:268–69]

There are also genetic and environmental factors involved. Elder Neal A. Maxwell said:

Of course our genes, circumstances, and environments matter very much, and they shape us significantly. Yet there remains an inner zone in which we are sovereign, unless we abdicate. In this zone lies the essence of our individuality and our personal accountability. [“According to the Desire of [Our] Hearts,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 21]

We will likely need to wait until the eternities to understand how our spiritual personalities specifically interact with genetic and environmental influences in mortality. From an academic perspective, we can only systematically study a small portion of the full equation that involves only the interaction of biological and environmental factors in a millisecond of eternity. Our understanding of this small portion is slowly increasing.

As an example, it was once simplistically thought that certain parenting practices typically led to desired child and adolescent conformance and behavior. It is true that following certain parenting principles will increase the probability of obtaining desired outcomes for the majority of children and youth. Research shows that parents can make the most difference by teaching moral and religious values that can help their children make wise choices, even in the face of biological urges or peer influences that would have them do otherwise (see W. Andrew Collins and others, “Contemporary Research on Parenting: The Case for Nature and Nurture,” *American Psychologist* 55, no. 2 [February 2000]: 218–32). This is why parents who actively teach righteous living by precept and example, who strive to be connected with their children, who impose appropriate limits on behavior, and who allow appropriate latitude for child decision making are more likely to have well-adjusted children and teens (see Craig H. Hart, Lloyd D. Newell, and Susanne Frost Olsen, “Parenting Skills and Social-Communicative Competence in Childhood,” in John O. Greene and Brant R. Burleson, eds., *Handbook of Communication and Social Interaction*

Skills [Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003], 753–97).

But there are many exceptions to these statistical trends—often in the same families. More recent multivariate studies have also documented how susceptible children are to certain child-rearing influences, and parental values depend in large part on their personalities, temperamental dispositions, and other biologically based characteristics. Individual characteristics contribute to dynamic parent-child interactions that are influenced by a host of other factors across development, including cultural norms, educational practices, media, and peers, to name a few (see Craig H. Hart, “Why Are Parents Important? Linking Parenting to Childhood Social Skills in Australia, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States,” in A. Scott Loveless and Thomas B. Holman, eds., *The Family in the New Millennium: World Voices Supporting the “Natural” Clan*, 3 vols. [Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2007], 1:227–47). Taking all these factors into account does not easily lead to predictable outcomes for all children and youth.

In his encouragement of parents dealing with the many complexities associated with child rearing, President Brigham Young was well ahead of his time when he suggested that parents “study [children’s] dispositions and their temperaments, and deal with them accordingly” (*JD* 19:221).

President James E. Faust more recently reminded us that “child rearing is so individualistic. . . . What works with one [child] may not work with another” (“The Greatest Challenge in the World—Good Parenting,” *Ensign*, November 1990, 34).

Most parents learn this pretty quickly. I once thought I had figured out how to get one of my daughters to bed when she was young. After experimenting with a number of strategies beyond the bedtime story and prayer routine, I finally discovered that she went happily to bed if I gave her the option of either me turn-

ing the light off or letting her do it. That lasted for about two weeks, but it was bliss. When I later tried that strategy with my other daughter at about the same age, she simply responded to my choices of who would turn the light off by defiantly stating that she wasn’t going to bed. But I did discover that swimming together into her bedroom on the floor like fish or jumping into the bedroom together like kangaroos did the trick for her—but only for about two weeks. Then it was on to more experiments to figure out what worked next.

In conclusion, despite all that we have considered today, there is much about our premortal development and how our specific actions in the spirit world influence us in mortality that has not been revealed. Although secular knowledge somewhat explains how genetic-based characteristics and environmental influences interact to influence human development, there is an important spiritual dimension of our beings that cannot be readily probed by scientific means. What a wonderful blessing it will be if we are found worthy to learn from our Heavenly Father about how our spiritual personalities and biology are intertwined, according to His foreknowledge, in preparation for individualized schooling experiences in mortality. We have much to look forward to learning in that celestial university on high.

Sister Marilyn S. Bateman in an earlier devotional talk put much of what we have contemplated today into perspective when she reminded us that “knowledge of the premortal world provides a context for mortality. This life is the second act of a three-act play” (in Merrill J. and Marilyn S. Bateman, “Mortality and Our Eternal Journey,” BYU devotional address, 14 January 2003). What a marvelous blessing it is to live in a day when this treasured knowledge has been restored by a prophet of God.

I testify that we live in a time of continuing revelation from a loving Heavenly Father who is very interested in facilitating our eternal

progression back into His presence. It is my hope and prayer that we will be more cognizant of our divine natures, which are rooted in an existence that long preceded our birth into mortality. May we utilize the talents that we have been blessed with to further our

Heavenly Father's plan of happiness for our brothers and sisters. And may we make good choices in life that are commensurate with our eternal identity and the decisions that we made in the premortal realm. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.