

LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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Not a Day without a Line

The setting was spectacular: the terrace of a centuries-old monastery overlooking the ancient city of Florence. The setting sun had bathed in flame the stunning cupola of Brunelleschi's *duomo*. By sheer, unmerited good luck, I was at a dinner intended for people far more important than I, seated next to Sabino Cassese, an immensely cultivated octogenarian, a prominent public intellectual, a former constitutional judge, and something of an academic legend.

I had written to Professor Cassese over the transom to ask if he'd be willing to meet to discuss my then-current research project. He responded graciously and in true Italian style, warmly agreeing to meet and suavely smuggling me into this VIP meal.

We talked as we dined of many things—of poetry and politics, literature and law, Tolstoy and Thomas Mann. We also talked about our own scholarship. I was astonished and humbled by his seemingly boundless productivity. Even at 84, he was a veritable geyser of articles and books, commentaries and reviews. What, I eventually asked, was the secret to such productivity? He responded with an uncomfortable question of his own.

“Do you know Latin?” he asked.

“Not really,” I hedged.

He then quoted Pliny the Elder's Latin rendering of a Greek mantra: *Nulla dies sine linea*—Not a day without a line. That, Sabino said, was his secret. He never stopped. He never missed. He did some writing every single day.

There is, I have found, accumulating power in persistence, concentrated benefits in consistency.

Quotidian habits yield compounded results. Regularity is a potent multiplier.

I have also found that if I want to do something daily, I had better do it early. We often use *priorities* as a synonym for *values*, suggesting that our highest priorities are the things we most prize—the objects toward which we bend our best efforts. But in a more basic sense, *priority* is a chronological term. Priorities are what we do first—what we do *prior* to everything else.

Inevitably, the number of things we can do daily is very limited. By definition, there is only one thing we can do first. I've tried over the years to adopt various daily habits—from exercise and scholarship to journaling and poetry. In most cases, my success has been mixed. (In some cases, my failure has been unmixed.) I have been enduringly successful only in the one habit with which I still try to begin each day. For nearly a quarter century, with very few exceptions, I have begun my days by praying and reading the Book of Mormon.

And that, as the poet said, has made all the difference.¹ Virtually every good thing in my life can be traced, directly or indirectly, to that morning ritual. My whole soul resonates with Captain Moroni's reference to “the sacred word of God, to which we owe all our happiness” (Alma 44:5).

Not long after I graduated from law school, I was asked to speak in stake conference on the topic of holding fast to the iron rod. As I prepared for that talk, I realized that, throughout my education, daily time in the Book of Mormon had proved my saving grace. My spiritual journey had sometimes been tumultuous, but that personal rod

of iron had been constant and unwavering. “I am still here,” I realized, “thanks to my daily immersion in the Book of Mormon.”

Since then, I have tried to sustain that blessing and transmit it to my students, encouraging them in what President Oaks has called “holy habits and righteous routines.”² Sometimes I have done so by means of a homey little rhyme:

In the scriptures every day,

In the temple when I may,

Often on my knees to pray,

On the covenant path to stay.

“If you are not . . . seeking the Lord through daily prayer and gospel study,” President Nelson has warned, “you leave yourself vulnerable to philosophies that may be intriguing but are not true. Even saints who are otherwise faithful can be

derailed by the steady beat of Babylon’s band.”³ This admonition is as urgent, I think, for us as faculty as it is for our students.

A previous prophet suggested that our collective immersion in the scriptures might prove essential to fulfilling BYU’s institutional mission. “We understand,” President Kimball declared, “. . . that education is a part of being about our Father’s business and that *the scriptures contain the master concepts for mankind.*”⁴

As we begin a new year, I hope we can all find some application of the principle “not a day without a line” in the context of our faculty stewardships. More importantly, I hope we can embrace a far more critical principle with much more enduring consequences: “not a day without a lifeline to heaven”—not a day without some line of scripture, not a day without some word of prayer.

¹ See Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken,” in *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (Edward Connery Lathem, ed., 1979 [1969]) 105.

² Quoted in Jonathan S. Schmitt, “That They Might Know Thee,” *Liahona*, November 2022. Other Church leaders have used the phrase as well. See, for example, Gerrit W. Gong, “Our Campfire of Faith,” *Liahona*, November 2018; Steven J. Lund, “Lasting Discipleship,” *Liahona*, November 2022.

³ Russell M. Nelson, “Make Time for the Lord,” *Liahona*, November 2021.

⁴ Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” October 10, 1975, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/spencer-w-kimball/second-century-brigham-young-university/> (emphasis added).