

“Achieving Worthwhile Goals”

Elder Quentin L. Cook

Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you wonderful students. In addition to physical challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, you also have special challenges, some of which are unique to our day. Many of you are concerned about faith, testimony, and spirituality. You are also concerned about decisions relating to education, employment, marriage, and family.

I am exceedingly grateful that you have chosen BYU-Pathway as you face these decisions. You have chosen an excellent institution. You are on a good path. A great teacher declared that he who chooses the beginning of a path, chooses the place to which it leads. I pray that the most important path you will choose is the Savior’s covenant path.

The Savior, in paying the penalty for our sins, did not relieve us of personal responsibility for how we live our lives. The value of work, industriousness, laboring with our might, improving our talents, and providing for families have been universally proclaimed in scriptures from the beginning. In Genesis, the Lord declared, “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground....”¹

I believe these doctrinal concepts are widely accepted by members. However, in a complex world there is much confusion about how to implement these principles. I desire to share with you some true accounts and principles that have been important to me over the years.

In my first general conference address, 20 years ago, I told a somewhat humorous personal account that relates directly to these issues.

When our children were small, my wife, Mary, and I decided to follow a tradition, which my father taught when I was a child. He would meet with me and my siblings individually to help us set goals in various aspects of our lives and teach us how Church, school, and extracurricular activities would help us achieve these goals. He had three rules:

1. We needed to have worthwhile goals.
2. We could change our goals at any time.
3. We had to diligently work toward whatever goal we chose.

Having been the beneficiary of this tradition, Mary and I decided to engage in this practice with our children. When our son, Larry, was five years old, I asked him what he wanted to do for an occupation when he grew up. He said he wanted to become a doctor like his Uncle Joe.² Larry had experienced a serious operation and had acquired great respect for doctors, especially his Uncle Joe. I proceeded to tell Larry how all the worthwhile things he was doing would help prepare him to perform the work of a doctor.

Several months later, I asked him again what he would like to do when he grew up. This time he said he wanted to be an airline pilot. Changing the goal was fine, so I proceeded to explain how his various activities would help him achieve this goal. Almost as an afterthought, I said, “Larry, last time we talked you wanted to become a doctor. What has changed your mind?” He answered, “I think being a doctor would be good, but I have noticed that Uncle Joe works on Saturday mornings, and I wouldn’t want to miss Saturday morning cartoons on television.” Since that time our family has labeled a distraction from a worthwhile goal as a Saturday morning cartoon.

The principle I desire to stress from this true account is how you plan and prepare to achieve worthwhile goals in today's world.

I am particularly concerned about how many young adults fail to set righteous goals or have a plan to achieve them. I am also concerned that many underestimate and devalue their own talents and capabilities. Resolving these two issues will bring much joy into your life.

A recognized author in an important book³ presents a compelling case that many, if not most, people overvalue so-called native ability and undervalue hard work and grit. She makes the case that success of all kinds is distinguished more by a good work ethic than by pure intelligence or ability. She points out that people with determination and direction consistently perform better than those with natural ability who do not have the same grit.⁴

What I am suggesting is that you can meet many of your righteous worthwhile goals with planning, grit, and determination, especially if you eliminate the Saturday morning cartoons of life. You can also find more joy and happiness in your life.

I want to assure you that you can do hard things. I have sometimes shared an account about my friend, John Dickson. Elder John B. Dickson was a marvelous Seventy, now emeritus, who served with distinction all over the world. He demonstrated overcoming hardships in a fun and unusual way. Elder Dickson was called to serve as a missionary assigned to Mexico in 1962. Before he departed, he was diagnosed with bone cancer in his right arm. He was not expected to live more than a month; however, 10 months later he left to serve his assigned mission having had his arm amputated.⁵ I will never forget how he taught missionaries at the Provo MTC that they could do hard things. He invited four missionaries to come up to the stand and compete with him in a tie-tying contest. Think about tying a tie with one arm! A while back I asked Elder Dickson to demonstrate. Let's watch.

[Video]

When Elder Dickson did this at the Provo MTC, he defeated all four of the missionaries using his teeth, his shoulders, and his chest in a marvelous way. Please know that you can overcome adversity and do hard things.

A prominent professor, Angela Duckworth notes that "enthusiasm is common. Endurance is rare."⁶

One of the studies she cites emphasizes the importance of active preparation for life, including perseverance, tenacity, doggedness, and the tendency not to abandon tasks in the face of obstacles.⁷

She also extols having a higher purpose that contributes to the well-being of others.⁸ She states, "Fortunate indeed are those who have a top-level goal so consequential to the world that it imbues everything they do, no matter how small or tedious, with significance. Consider the parable of the bricklayers:

Three bricklayers are asked: 'What are you doing?'

The first says, 'I am laying bricks.'

The second says, 'I am building a church.'

And the third says, 'I am building the house of God.'

The first bricklayer has a job. The second has a career. The third has a calling."⁹

My challenge to you is to examine your goals and determine which ones will allow you to fulfill family obligations, and keep you on your covenant pathway, and allow you to have the joy the Lord wants for you. Remember having a goal allows you to save time and effort by planning ahead and not missing important prerequisites and deadlines.

You are a magnificent generation. The scriptures are clear that in the last days there will be “wickedness and abominations.” However, the Saints, small in number and “scattered upon all the face of the earth,” will be “armed with righteousness and with the power of God in great glory.”¹⁰ The Lord promised that He will “preserve the righteous” and we “need not fear.”¹¹

You need not be afraid despite the dangers and challenges you will face. You will be blessed and protected when you seek righteous, worthwhile goals; plan and work with grit and determination; and rely and focus on faith, repentance, saving ordinances, and the Savior’s atoning sacrifice as you endure to the end. Focusing on the temple will help you achieve these goals.

To paraphrase Romans 12:12, be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer. You can avoid the Saturday morning cartoons of life and achieve the joy the Savior has promised.

I solemnly testify of the divinity of Jesus Christ. Because of Him we need not fear, for in Him our joy is full. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

¹ [Genesis 3:19](#)

² My brother, Dr. Joseph V. Cook, Jr., is still a practicing physician at 86 years of age. During this time, he was Larry’s doctor and stake president.

³ See Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (2016)

⁴ *Ibid*, 8

⁵ “[Elder John B. Dickson](#),” *Ensign*, Aug. 1992, 77

⁶ Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (2016), 58

⁷ *Ibid*, 77, citing a 1926 study by Stanford Psychologist, Catharine Cox

⁸ *Ibid*, 143

⁹ *Ibid*, 149

¹⁰ [1 Nephi 14:12, 14](#)

¹¹ [1 Nephi 22:17](#)