



Life's Lessons Learned: Personal Reflections

Dallin H. Oaks

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I have learned things that have shaped my life and teachings, including some things of the heart not previously shared, writes Elder Dallin H. Oaks in the introduction to this unique book. "This is an autobiography of learning and application rather than a compendium of doctrine." Masterfully blending personal experiences with the doctrines of the gospel, Elder Oaks invites us to join him on a journey through some of the turning points in his life and the lessons he has learned through a lifetime of devotion to the Savior. The short but potent chapters offer perceptive observations into such diverse topics as the purpose of adversity, the importance of respecting those with whom we disagree personally or politically, the merits and limitations of law, the blessings of tithing, the seeming conflict between science and religion, the Lord's use of imperfect people to further His work, and the power of the Atonement to recover those who have fallen behind. Elder Oaks also relates the very personal lessons he learned from the death of his wife, June, and from his subsequent marriage to Kristen McMain. Woven throughout the book is Elder Oak's powerful testimony of the Savior and His mission. Life's Lessons Learned is a rare glimpse into the experiences of the heart that have shaped the life of an Apostle of God."

Life's Lessons Learned: Personal Reflections Details

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Tonya says

This book is exactly what it says it is - lessons learned throughout life by the author and short descriptions of how he learned them. I liked the short chapters - easy to read a bit here and there. His writing is like his speaking - clear and to the point.

Some "lessons" I especially liked:

Neither faith nor priesthood power can invoke a blessing that is contrary to the will of the Lord.

Separate respect for a person's position from our personal affection or belief about policies.

Seek to solve problems on your own, without turning to law or government.

What do you want to be remembered for?

Don't try to provide "reasons" for divine commandments or revelations.

Our afflictions will be consecrated for our gain.

Goals should concern things that can be attained by our personal effort.

Sins vs. mistakes - sin = repentance, mistake = need to be corrected

Don't call on teenagers to repent for mistakes.

We put political disagreements in the appropriate context when we remember that even if our political adversaries are making the wrong choice (as we suppose), that is generally a matter of error (mistake) rather than transgression (sin).

When we are uncertain about some gospel principle or future event, it is usually best to act on what we do know and trust in a loving Heavenly Father to give us further knowledge when we really need it.

Principle vs. preferences - kids should understand the difference

It is in our personal interactions with one another that we are most likely to find the influence and transforming power of the spirit.

And my favorite, from a letter he wrote to a church member who asked for him to intervene in a family situation: The kind of problem you describe in your letter is the kind that often requires a long time to resolve. The Savior's way requires patience and ample opportunity for persons (even persons who are at fault) to use their own agency to make the choices necessary for their growth. In the meantime, others endure painful circumstances and have to exercise almost superhuman patience. But that is the Lord's way, and the Church and His servants have no way to compel otherwise. If we cannot be patient with the existing

circumstance, the processes of the civil law are the only compulsory processes available to us.

Mary L. says

To hear the many lessons that an Apostle has learned and to think of ways to apply them into daily living was a real treat. I really felt that I got to know him better and look forward to the next time I hear him speak. His love of the gospel, fellow man and the Savior are evident throughout the book.

T.K. says

This is so powerful. President Oaks acknowledges that he doesn't usually share personal experiences, but when he does, they make for profound life lessons. I really felt he was speaking to me, and in a way I could really understand. I hope this sticks with me forever.

Terrol Williams says

There are different kinds of stars. This one gets five because of the level of change I want to make in myself as a result of reading it.

Heather says

This is a sweet book. I'm grateful for the insights Elder Oaks shares and the principles he teaches and testimony he shares. It's neat to learn more about him and his life and experiences that taught him important truths and principles. I'm inspired by his example of humility, steadfastness and dedication to the Lord.

Reading this book reminded me how I want to be a better journal writer and consistently record important principles as I learn. It also reminded me that Apostles are real people with real challenges, but exceptional faith and determination to serve the Lord and love others above all else. The lessons Elder Oaks shares help us to see the real meaning and purpose of life.

Here are a few of the topics that I really liked:

"Each of us should pursue truth by both reason (science) and faith (religion) (p. 60)."

"We should ask ourselves, 'What would you like to be remembered for when you are released from your present position (p. 63)?'"

"I often heard my mother say that the Lord consecrated affliction for her gain because her husband's death

compelled her to develop her talents and serve and become something that she would never have become without that seeming tragedy (p. 70)." What a wonderful example of not feeling sorry for yourself, but moving forward and doing good and becoming better!

"Feelings are vital to the process of revelation. We should always be prepared to act upon an impression when we 'feel it is right (p. 77)."

"To be most effective in furthering our progress, goals should concern things that can be attained by our personal efforts. They should not depend on the agency or efforts of others....Even more significant goals of this kind concern our desires, which dictate our priorities and shape our choices, actions, and feelings (p. 79)."

"Following are seven important leadership principles I have learned from my life's experiences:

- 1. Love*
- 2. Don't be overly concerned with popularity*
- 3. Make decisions and stick with them*
- 4. Be positive*
- 5. Clearly define what is expected*
- 6. Be calm*
- 7. Set the right example (p. 86)."*

"Throughout the remainder of your life will you be a lawyer and judge who has been called to be an Apostle, or will you be an Apostle who used to be a lawyer and judge?' There is a strong tendency in most of us to spend most of our time doing what we feel comfortable in doing....I decided that I would focus my efforts on becoming what I had been called to be, not on what I felt qualified to do. I determined that instead of trying to shape my calling to my credentials, I would try to shape myself to my calling (p. 99)."

"It is not enough to ask with a sincere heart, having faith in Christ. We must also ask with real intent. Real intent requires a commitment to act upon the truth when the Lord reveals it (p. 105)."

"We should be careful not to label or define ourselves by some temporary quality. The only single quality that should characterize us is that each of us is a son or daughter of God. That fact transcends all other characteristics. Yet there are some among us who choose to define or label themselves by some temporary characteristic, such as occupation, appearance, honors, athletic ability, or fame (p. 119)."

"I remember when you went around and shook everyone's hand, and how when you came to me, you looked directly in my eyes. I had never seen eyes like that before, so pure and full of joy....I flipped through the program...it said this was your first speaking assignment since the death of your wife....Just then I felt the Spirit rush over me as I realized that anyone whose eyes could look like yours did, after such a tragedy, had to be part of something miraculous, and I knew it must be this Church (p. 150)."

Emily says

This is a quick, uplifting read from Elder Oaks. The individual vignettes are three to four pages long with the "lesson learned" summarized briefly at the end, and organized chronologically as Elder Oaks experienced them.

I especially enjoyed the glimpses into his early life (my nine-year-old took hope from the fact that Elder Oaks struggled with math in 4th grade, too!) and youth being raised by his widowed mother and his stories about the death of his first wife and subsequent second marriage.

He praises observant Jews Sabbath practices as "in several respects superior to mine and those of many other Latter-day Saints," differentiates between "sins" and "mistakes," and says "I don't know" when he doesn't know something. I found the acknowledgement of an apostle's lack of omniscience, and willingness to learn from others, comforting.

Some of the "lessons learned" were spiritual insights ("Revelation comes in different ways, and we should be open to recognize and receive it" however it comes.) and some were secular, almost political ("Laws enacted by governments are often blunt instruments. We should do all that we can for ourselves and through private organizations before seeking to solve problems by law or other government action."). Some have application in a myriad of settings ("Good leaders set a proper example and have love, optimism, clarity, simplicity in communication, and calmness under pressure.") and others are very specific ("General Church leaders cannot meet with or intervene for all who request their help.")

Life's Lessons Learned is organized so that just about anyone can find a story or lesson that will touch him or her.

*Disclosure: I received a review copy from the publisher.

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Lowell says

"Despite resolving that I would not write another book, I felt a strong impression to write this book about lessons learned in my life's experiences that might be helpful to others."

I've kept a journal for 17 years, now constituting approximately 800 typed pages. Perhaps more than any other reason, I choose to maintain this journal because it helps me organize my thoughts and reflect on how lucky I really am in my life. Three years ago when I started typing up my entire old entries, I discovered so many powerful lessons I've learned, that time and life have caused to slowly fade from memory. However, these small moments in my life have subconsciously become a part of who I am, and I'm grateful for those moments.

I only mention this to emphasize that with such a simple introduction as that quoted above, Dallin H. Oaks grabs me hook, line, and sinker. He doesn't disappoint. Elder Oaks demonstrates that much of the character we develop and the lessons that influence us occur in the normal, day-to-day affairs of life.

Sidenote: I STRONGLY recommend that anybody interested in this book research Elder Oaks' messages on the BYU Speeches website (speeches.byu.edu). Some of the footnotes and lessons comes from messages he has delivered at devotionals and firesides over the past 40 years, and they are INCREDIBLE messages.

Jenny says

Each chapter contains a short vignette from Elder Oaks' life as well as a lesson he learned from that experience.

A few of the lessons that stand out to me:

"We are all preparing for things to come....We are all children of a Heavenly Father who has sent us to earth with the invitation to prepare for eternal life. Every choice, every experience, every repentance and reformation, prepares us for what is to come. Remembering that important truth will guide our choices and inform our evaluation of where we have been and where we are going." (P. 50,52)

"What would you like to be remembered for after you are released from your present positions?" (Whether a calling, an occupation, a parent... Be clear in your mind about this and then try to live up to this standard...act in that way.)

It's important to not let pride in our accomplishments prevent us from having the necessary humility to continue to learn and grow.

I loved his chapter on adversity and how his shortage of money as a graduate student led his wife and him to write letters to loved ones instead of making long-distance phone calls. Because he got in that habit, he has been able to write family histories and remember cherished events that were written down that would have been forgotten if they had made phone calls. I love being reminded that our challenges can actually be a blessing in the long run. (I was just thinking today about my daughter's open heart surgery 9 1/2 years ago and how it has helped me develop more compassion and given me an idea of concrete ways I can help others when they experience similar situations, just as one example.)

Perhaps the chapter that was most beneficial to me was the chapter on goal setting. After reading/pondering on what he says, it seems so straightforward but it is something I have often done incorrectly. Probably not on my "official" written down goals but on goals I've had in my head and heart. Elder Oaks explains that goals must be based on things that we can attain through our own personal efforts and should not be based on the agency or efforts of others. He says, "If we pursue a goal that concerns what we can do, our commitments and standards can be constant whatever the circumstances beyond our control. In contrast, when goals depend upon the agency and action of others, the failure to attain them can only produce frustration to the one who set them." Examples of goals that depend on another person might be to be employed in a specific position, make a specific number of sales, get married by a particular time or have a child become adept at a specific talent or skill. An example he gives is that a missionary could set goals for the number of hours they will work, how they will study, and rules they will follow rather than how many people they will baptize this month. This is kind of life-changing because as I read this, I thought of several examples where I felt like I was failing at something important to me but my feelings of failure were a result of someone else's agency.

"Good leaders set a proper example and have love, optimism, clarity, simplicity in communication, and calmness under pressure." *I definitely need to work on the last two.

"When called to a Church position, we should focus our efforts on being what we are called to be, not on what we feel qualified to do."

"The Lord teaches us to serve out of love for Him and for His children, not to fill any need or win any recognition for ourselves."

Scott says

Dallin H. Oaks is a spiritual and intellectual giant, and this book clearly reflects that. I've always liked and admired Elder Oaks and look forward to his discourses whenever he speaks publicly. His recent talk on religious freedom is, in my opinion, one of the most important talks given in years. His philosophies and insights not only parallel mine, they inspire mine as well. He is truly an exemplary person.

In this book, his insights are fascinating and rich. What struck me while I was reading was the surprisingly intimate tone; it felt like I knew this man and he was sharing personal reflections from his life with me. And his insights don't feel redundant or obligatory; they are novel and interesting. I regret that my copy of this was a library book, because I constantly wanted to mark it up.

One of the reasons why I enjoyed his insights so much is his legal orientation. Elder Oaks is/was a very respected attorney, legal professor, university president, and judge on the Utah supreme court. As such, he's always taken a prudent approach on matters of importance. True to his legal background, he also takes great care to unpack the meaning of words. In a spiritual/doctrinal context, this talent is especially valuable. Read his commentary on Moroni's promise in Moroni 10:3-5 (in the Book of Mormon)--you'll see what I mean. He is able to tease out some very important distinctions in scripture that I believe are very valuable not only for members of the LDS church, but for the world as a whole.

I am very grateful I was able to read this book, and I invite all those who are looking for spiritual insights to do the same.

Josh Steimle says

I'm not sure how it could be better, other than I wouldn't have minded had it been longer. I like the format of the book--short chapters, most 1-2 pages long, each sharing a lesson with a 1-2 sentence summary of the lesson at the end. Like everything Elder Oaks produces it's concise, clear, well-organized, to the point, and quite illuminating.

Darrell says

Loved it.

reread May 2016.

Kathy says

In Life Lessons learned Elder Oaks gives us a glimpse into a few of the experiences in his life that shaped him into the powerful leader he is today. From a very rocky beginning when he lost his father at a young age to his ultimate call to be an Apostle he shares nuggets of wisdom he learned along his journey in life.

The chapters in this book are quite short just 3 or 4 pages each. This made it a perfect book to read a chapter or two when I've had a few minutes or before falling asleep each night.

I used one of the chapters as a family home evening lesson for my kids earlier this week. Amazing that this great man whose career achievements including being a Utah Supreme Court judge and the President of BYU was once thought of himself as the dumbest boy in the classroom and had the lowest grades on his arithmetic papers. I was touched as he recounted the experience of losing his wife and his subsequent decision to remarry. His life story is truly inspiring.

Rating: 4.5 Stars Highly Recommend

Source: From Publisher for Review

Sherrill says

This is a sweet little book that you can polish off on a Sunday afternoon waiting for church to start. His reflections are mostly useful although some were more for Apostles and Mission Presidents. When I was at BYU I remember hearing Stella Harris Oaks on the radio as she was a city councilwoman or something of that nature. I didn't then know she was a widow who would raise up a son that would share his name with one of my grandsons. I liked his thoughts on how we cannot pray away another person's agency. When missionaries ask someone to pray about the Book of Mormon with a sincere heart having faith in Christ sometimes we don't remember that they need to pray with "real intent", meaning they are willing to change their lives if need be. It also made me chuckle when he said he honored his great great grandmother who said "Damn a man who would fetch a woman to such a God forsaken place" when they were sent away from their beautiful home to colonize in a place not so nice. He liked her quote because it showed her willingness to obey even when she didn't want to. My own great great grandma said the words to the song "as merrily on their way they go until they reach the valley-o" were hogwash because she didn't see anything merrily about it. Maybe I too will be forgiven for being such a reluctant missionary cause did it anyway.

Josephine says

I think my favorite thing about this book was that it was short and to the point. It also didn't include any conference talks or anything already freely available online. It was all new material written by Elder Oaks. He just wrote about key experiences in his life that have shaped who he has become. It was one of those things where you can take what might help you and leave the rest behind. It made me want to write a short

history of my own life and experiences that have been turning points in my own life.
I checked this out for free on my kindle through the online library, and it was worth the read.

Dlora says

Elder Oaks said he felt he needed to write a book sharing the lessons he has learned from personal experiences--not something he is comfortable doing. That reminded me of a comment President Eyring made during a general conference: "I heard in my mind—not in my own voice—these words: 'I'm not giving you these experiences for yourself. Write them down.'" It would seem Elder Oaks has the same feeling--that his life experiences are meant to be shared with more than himself. His "personal reflections" add biographical detail about his life, but I found it amusing that his training and inclination towards reason and logic shaped how he tells even a personal story. The emotion and feeling are under the surface and still to be guessed at, even when he talks about the death of his father, his difficulties as a young boy, the grief he battled with when his wife died, or even falling in love with his second wife. Even the fact that he refers us to or quotes from previous articles where he has talked about the same principle has a feeling of his legal training and researching precedents. Despite the slightly dry and logical presentation, I still very much enjoyed the lessons he has shared with us and was impressed with his insights and brilliance. It makes me wonder if I were to write a similar type of book, what key lessons would I include that life has taught me?
