

# Reaping Where We Have Not Sown

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*Note: Douglas Hunter delivered this address in the East Pasadena Ward, on December 14, 2008.*

Moments after hearing the bishop's voice ask if I could speak on the importance of developing talents, another voice spoke the phrase "you reap where you do not sow" into my awareness. As we all know, these words come from the parable of the talents. The phrase is part of the address of the last slave to give account of his dealings to his master. He says: "Master, I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed. So I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours" (Matt 25:24–25, New Standard Revised Version). These words are used to indict the character who speaks them as fearful, perhaps lazy, and definitely unwilling to give his best efforts for the sake of the one he serves. But if we read his words within the context of the linguistic accident from which we take the meaning and purpose of the story, then they have a different use.

The linguistic accident is, of course, the dual meaning of the word "talent." "Talent" denotes both the monetary unit equaling 5,000 denari,<sup>1</sup> and also the skills, attributes, and abilities we possess and can develop for the benefit of the community and in service to God. This linguistic accident and the idea of talents as something concrete and quantifiable is appealing to us because it gives us a job, something pragmatic to work on. It suggests that we have a duty to identify, nourish, and then use our own unique abilities for the sake of the kingdom. And that is an empowering message.

So, how should we understand the slave's words, "You reap

where you do not sow”? In the context of our understanding of talents, the phrase can be seen as a description of a master who sought to gain abilities and skills without searching himself to discover them, without nurturing them, or developing them. In other words, the master desires to gain talents without making the effort that we understand as essential to the very idea of talents.

Thus, the question: Is it possible to develop talents without being pragmatic, without searching, without making the effort? Are there abilities and skills within us that we gain without consciously fostering them? That by luck, or accident we grow in ways we do not anticipate or even know that growth is possible? For me, the answer is yes. I have to acknowledge that the talents I value most, as inchoate as they may be, are fostered in unexpected and unpredictable ways. I realize that people who know me well do not consider me a very empathetic person; nonetheless, I have a great deal more empathy now than I used to. And the process of developing empathy has been less a process of conscious effort than it has been a reaction to life’s various experiences. Some examples:

The first is pretty common. It is being a witness to the birth of my children. I mean this in terms of the whole experience, not just the longed-for arrival of a child. In all three births, my wife, Michele, underwent immense physical suffering and emotional trauma. It’s difficult to see someone you love go through that, knowing you can’t really do anything about it, other than be a witness to it. As a witness I can testify to how far giving birth pushed her, how it disfigured her body, took her well beyond the point of total exhaustion, and beyond the imaginable realm of emotional stamina. I can testify to her boldness in the face of all of it. I can also honestly say that my own fear in witnessing her suffering took me to a place I had never been before. I heard it observed some time ago that all first-time fathers are terrified in the delivery room because they believe their wives are going to die. Here in Pasadena, with our access to excellent medical care, such a fear may not be well founded, yet I have to admit it was real for me. I didn’t think it possible to go through twenty hours of difficult and painful labor and be all right at the end of it.

So in the births, I witnessed Michele’s tremendous strength and her fragility. And when I got to hold my newborn children, I witnessed their delicate beauty, their fragility, and their total de-

pendence. I also was thrust into the circle of unconditional love. In witnessing and empathizing, in being exposed to human fragility, my spiritual talents were challenged and even expanded without the nobility of a concentrated effort on my part. I reaped where I did not sow.

Another experience: My father has had cancer for about fifteen years. During this time, he has remained quite healthy; he is active, athletic, and has maintained a thriving professional life. Even so, in the background is the presence of a muted dread, a presence of something awful and threatening that could burst to the forefront at any time. Two years ago he was on aggressive medications that took a worse toll on him than the disease. We were vacationing on the coast of Maine, and my six-year-old daughter Addison was enthralled with the idea of going fishing, something she had never done before. So for days she had been pestering my father, asking when we could go fishing, and did we have bait, and could she hold her own rod? Finally, on an absolutely stunning afternoon, with a high tide pushing up against the rocky shore and a cool, humid breeze off the North Atlantic, my then-eighty-year-old father gathered the fishing rods and headed down the path with my mother to meet Addison and me on a granite ledge by the water.

As they approached, I witnessed the difficulty he had stepping over a small fallen log and a few rocks that marked the division between the trail and the craggy shore. It was with embarrassment and impatience that he accepted my mother's hand to help navigate these minor obstacles. Once on our ledge, he sat down and attempted to put a lure on the line. It was another task that he could not complete on his own. After I put the lure on the line for him, he stood up, brought the rod over his head, then yanked it forward toward the ocean. In making that small movement, he lost his balance; and as he stumbled forward, the lure smacked the rocks immediately in front of him. Sitting back down with humiliation burning inside him, he lashed out, saying what a stupid idea this was. My mother helped him up and led him back to the cabin, while I explained to Addison that we would try fishing another day. Then I rushed off to hide in the trees alongside our cabin where I could not be seen crying.

It's not that I didn't get it—that I didn't understand aging or the long-term effects of disease. It was just that I don't see my parents very often, so that day was something of a Rip Van Winkle experience. While I was absent in my slumber, my father had been diminished. He had become fragile and ashamed. And I was taken by surprise by a moment I was not ready for, a moment so clearly marked by the presence of his mortality.

Here again, when the fragility of human existence confronted me, I found myself utterly changed. By being thrown into the agony of my father's complex blend of physical weakness, sorrow and shame, my capacity for love and empathy, my appreciation for the arc of life, was expanded simply by witnessing dramatic weakness in a man whose life was, until that point, defined by strength. I reaped where I did not sow.

One final example: The most significant way in which I have reaped an increase in spiritual talents where I have not sown arises out of something that has been present my entire life but about which I have been too much of a coward to speak.

For more than a decade, I've been engaged in an effort to understand and deal with the aftermath of being repeatedly sexually abused as a child. During the years that I've been engaged in the healing process, I have always done the work, believing that at some point I would get better, that I could be healed and restored to wholeness. But last summer I realized, for the first time that it's more honest to say I probably won't ever be fully healed or restored.

Recognizing this fact was not an act of giving up. It was an act of acceptance, of reconciliation, and it brought me freedom. It freed me from the exhausting emotional and spiritual struggle of trying to regain something beyond my reach. The reason this matters is that no human should ever have to suffer at the hands of another like that, and yet we live in a world where such suffering is commonplace. And if your life has been shaped by such an experience, you must do something with it, find a way to take possession of it, to embrace it and its consequences, to own it. These experiences must be integrated into the story of the self.

One way of doing this is to understand that the suffering we go through is shared by many others and that if we carefully examine the world, peering through the cracks in the walls of social

convention, we gain a witness of the unlimited suffering present in the lives of others.

Being broken and incomplete, having been subject to acts of violence and physical manipulation—these things used to isolate me and push me away from others. But over time they have become a source of empathy for the alienation, shame, agony, and outrages faced by others. It's this kind of empathy that allows one to transition from being an isolated victim to being a member of a community in spiritual relationship with others and responsible for their well-being. In coming to this point, I recognize that this entire process, this knowledge, this form of coming into community was initiated by events that never should have happened, events over which I had no control; and yet, in a strange way, by reconciling with my brokenness and in becoming aware of the possibility of not being healed, I have found a small way to move forward. In short, I reaped where I did not sow.

These three experiences are important because each constitutes a radical decentering and disorientation. They tore me away from old expectations, hopes, and desires, teaching me something new and totally unexpected about the fragility of life, the pain of existence, our dependency, and the way in which suffering is a gateway to empathy. Each experience pushed me farther down the path of empathy and compassion, allowing greater access to both and better ways to express them. So these abilities—these talents—were developed without a plan or directed effort. It was a matter of simply bearing honest witness.

By being a witness, I've come to the conclusion that the only talents, abilities, or human capacities that have much meaning or purpose are those we associate with Jesus: compassion, empathy, healing, generosity, patience, love. These are the human talents that give us power.

We often hear the phrase "speaking truth to power" in a political context, but we can use this phrase in the spiritual context if the truth being spoken is the local truth of individual experience, confession, and aspiration and if the power is the talents, abilities, and skills of those willing to listen to such truths.

When Jesus told his followers that in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and taking in the stranger, they were directly

serving him (Matt. 25:35–40), he was speaking the truth of the endless needs of the world in which we live to the power of his followers to meet those needs.

In 2006 an Amish community forgave the man who murdered their children and then gave love and support to that man's family. They spoke their truth of forgiving the unforgivable and spoke it to our ability to love and forgive in any way that is required in our own lives.

When Joseph Smith said that embracing Mormonism leads to "the shackles of superstition, bigotry, ignorance and priestcraft" falling from our necks,<sup>2</sup> he was not talking about something automatic. He was speaking the truth of our power to eradicate these things in ourselves if we are brave enough, if we are willing enough, visionary enough, and if we trust in God enough to let it happen.

When Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann writes: "We have been reduced to docile speech, to noncommittal chatter. We have been intimidated to speak only what is safe,"<sup>3</sup> then he is speaking the truth of what happens when our words no longer express authentic experience and instead seek approval and social acceptance from our faith community. This is a truth he speaks to the power found in our ability to speak honestly about our lives, the anguish in our hearts, and the way the Spirit moves our souls. He is speaking of our power to address what really matters to us if we are brave enough to break out of old patterns and expectations.

When a young LDS woman wrote on her blog in December 2008 that the Church's involvement in California politics left her spiritually exhausted and she didn't know if she could stay in the Church, then she was speaking the truth of her emptiness and of her position at the margin of the Mormon community to our power to embrace her and to be reasons for her, and many others like her, to stay among us.

When poet June Jordan writes:

. . . and the ones who stood without sweet company  
will sing and sing  
back into the mountains and  
if necessary even under the sea:  
*we are the ones we have been waiting for*<sup>4</sup>

then she is speaking the truth of what it means to be a people who wait. She is speaking the truth that, each day when we go out into the world and realize that Jesus isn't here yet, it is still a day when we have the power to act on behalf of the One we wait for: to take love, healing, kindness, the priesthood, His gospel, and all the rest into the world that day, because that is our calling. We cannot expect anyone else to do it for us.

And that is the importance of developing the talents that matter, those we associate with Jesus, and our Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father: empathy, compassion, healing, responsibility for the well-being of others, a sensitivity to the experiences and needs of others, and devotion to God. These are the talents the world longs for.

These talents can be developed in different ways; but as I've learned, it is possible that the most significant development of these talents may come from experiences that we do not welcome or do not control and that are not anticipated in any sense—experiences that put us in a position to reap where we do not sow.

### Notes

1. Michael D. Coogan ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 46 note f and note for v. 15.
2. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 264.
3. Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1989), 44.
4. June Jordan, "Poem for South African Women," in her *Passion: New Poems, 1977–1980* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), emphasis mine.