

From Doubt to Determination: Finding Light in Life's Challenges

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I still remember the time after I gave birth to my third child three years ago during COVID-19. It was one of the most difficult times in my life as I had just started my PhD program at IP&T. I had to take care of three young kids while trying to maintain good academic performance, teach an undergraduate course, and conduct research studies. At that time, I couldn't find any help except my husband, who also needed to work. I can only sleep less than 5 hours every day. I became really frustrated comparing my performance in my master's with my doctoral studies. I was outstanding among my master classmates, while my BYU classmates were smart, diligent, and had more time to study. It was the care of my academic advisor, Dr. Graham, and several talks that helped me get out of the difficult times.

Four years ago, after giving birth to my third child during COVID-19, I found myself in one of the most challenging periods of my life. I had just begun my PhD program in Instructional Psychology and Technology at BYU, all while caring for three young children, maintaining academic performance, teaching an undergraduate course, and conducting research. With little support beyond my working husband and fewer than five hours of sleep each night, I constantly felt overwhelmed. Comparing my stellar performance during my master's program to my struggles in the PhD program only deepened my frustration. While I excelled among my master's classmates, my BYU peers seemed smarter, more diligent, and better equipped with time to study. It was the care of my academic advisor and several talks that helped me get out of the difficult times.

My professor noticed that I wasn't quite myself and decided to have a conversation with me. During our talk, he introduced me to the concept of imposter syndrome. He explained that many college students, even those at the very top of their fields, often feel like they aren't good enough, aren't qualified, or aren't working hard enough. These feelings are more common than we realize, yet we rarely recognize them in others unless someone opens up about it.

My professor shared his personal experience with imposter syndrome during his PhD journey. At the time, he was juggling the immense responsibilities of raising five young children while striving to earn enough money to support his family. He faced judgment from people in his college who didn't understand why he had such a large family while also trying to advance his career. The pressure was overwhelming, and his primary goal became ensuring he achieved at least a B+ in every course. His story resonated deeply.

He told me that the reason he admitted me as his doctoral student was because he knew I was qualified and had the ability to engage in academic and research work. He reminded me that the doubts and "noise" in our heads often distract us from what truly matters. Instead of being consumed by those thoughts, he encouraged me to focus on what I can control. His advice was simple yet powerful: don't let self-doubt hold you back; channel your energy into what you can achieve. I was moved by his caring for students and regained my confidence.

The talk given by Elder Gilbert at the 2021 general conference also inspired me at that time. He emphasized the importance of focusing on our slope—the direction of our progress—rather than our intercept, or starting point. As long as we make progress, our slope will be positive. A positive slope can make us to be more Christ-like and closer to God. When I heard this, I felt light from Jesus. As an international student from China, transitioning to graduate school in the U.S. felt like starting from zero. My professional background in a Swiss and Swedish company didn't seem to translate. However, Elder Gilbert's message reminded me that consistent effort, no matter how slow, would lead me closer to Christ and personal growth. As busy as I am, I figured out that it is impossible never to encounter big challenges in life; some issues are unresolvable when we are not well prepared, and experiencing those difficulties is like collecting "treasures in ugly clothes".

Another source of light came from the devotional given by Melissa Larson, a recent PhD graduate from our program. She shared how she had been the top student from elementary school through college, but upon arriving at Brigham Young University, she suddenly found herself struggling. Despite her best efforts, she felt she couldn't keep up with her peers. After enduring a difficult period of self-doubt, Melissa got a breakthrough message from God, "Don't compare yourself to your classmates; learn from them." She shifted her mindset from competing with others to learning from them, seeking advice and insights. This change made her academic journey smoother and more fulfilling. Her experience taught me the power of letting go of comparisons. When we stop measuring ourselves against others, we can focus more fully on our own growth. Embracing the process over the outcome can lead to greater achievements as we learn to enjoy the journey and commit to our work without the distraction of competition.

Reflecting on Melissa's experience and Elder Gilbert's talk, I realized I'm someone who warms up slowly to new environments. When I first arrive somewhere new, I tend to be reserved and cautious. But as I settle in, I grow more comfortable, secure, and open. This initial adjustment period may mean I don't shine right away, but I don't lose faith in myself and in Jesus. My progress might be gradual, but it's steady. I've seen that I'm more like a long-distance runner than a sprinter. I may not have the fastest start, but I have endurance. As long as I keep moving forward, my pace doesn't matter as much. I may not be the most dazzling person in my environment, but fueled by a deep curiosity for diverse subjects, knowledge, and life itself, I aim to be a lifelong learner.

As long as we keep moving forward, it doesn't matter if we start from a low point, if our progress is slow, if we pause, or even if we occasionally slip back. What matters is that we continue onward, gradually becoming the best version of ourselves. I share my testimonies of the inspiration that helped lift me out of a slump. For those of you currently facing a difficult period or who have experienced one in the past, may we all find guidance and blessings from our heavenly father to overcome the challenges in life, have the resilience to keep going and have the strength to live a life on an upward path.

Throughout my BYU experience, I have gradually discovered the joy of serving others. My prayer list grew longer and longer, extending from family members to friends, to the sisters and brothers in the church, to my peers, to my son's former teacher... I began involving my children in service, taking them to volunteer at community events for those in need and donating items to

support others. These moments of service brought us closer together as a family and deepened our sense of gratitude and purpose. BYU's emphasis on collaboration and service has prepared me to uplift others by radiating resilience, faith, and hope, creating a ripple effect of positivity in my community and around the world.