

YOU WANT ME TO DO WHAT?

Dr. Jerold Don Ottley

College of Arts and Communications

Brigham Young University

October 11, 2012

A favorite piece of doggerel verse comes from an unknown American writer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The choirmaster stood at the pearly gates;

His face was worn and old.

He stood before the man of fate

For admission to the fold.

"What have you done," Saint Peter said,

"To gain admission here?"

"I've been a choir master sir," he said,

"For many and many a year."

The pearly gates flew open wide.

Saint Peter touched the bell,

"Come in," he said, "choose your harp."

"You've had your share of hell!"

When asked to deliver this lecture, it was suggested I might discuss some of the key experiences, influences, or circumstances that shaped my professional career. I find it very difficult to talk about myself but I can't do that without talking about myself and I've been encouraged by several general authorities to tell my story. At the time all these things were happening to me, they didn't mean a lot to me because I didn't have a master plan. I didn't get up one morning and say, "I'm going to be the Tabernacle Choir conductor. The only thing I understood when I was younger was my father's advice to earn my living by my wit. But I knew it wouldn't do it; half a living wouldn't be enough.

Early in our marriage, my wife and I determined that our best approach to life was to take one step at a time, asking the Lord at each stage what he would have us do. As I reveal these steps to you, it is hoped that you can glean some encouragement about

staying the course, taking opportunities, whether or not they make complete sense to you at the time.

Among the most often asked questions of my professional life, and the most difficult question to answer has been, “How did you become director of the Tabernacle Choir?” The easy answer is that I never really “became” the conductor or the Choir. The whole experience was more like a dream than a reality. All I did was survive. Only now in retrospect am I able to give it some realistic dimensions.

Because the answer to that question parallels what might happen to many of you in your personal and professional lives, I’m going to share some of that pathway with you under the heading, “You want me to do what?” I do this in the spirit of these words by Robert Frost.

“Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on thee  
And I’ll forgive thy great big one on me.”

It all started with my mother, a pianist and organist who insisted that she teach me piano lessons. Good fortune, yet problematic, to have a piano teacher in one’s own home. She also taught many of the girls in the neighborhood. Can you see the conflict in a boy’s life? I obediently surrendered to my mother’s desires until after I played in my first public recital, when I crashed and burned. I came all to pieces, played like a train wreck and left the platform in tears.

Coincidentally, or providentially, it was announced in my elementary school that a music teacher had been hired, and that music classes would be organized. I saw my chance! After school, I rushed to the basement of our home to retrieve my older brother’s forsaken slide trombone, cleaned it up and announced to my mother that I was going to join the school band, so I’d no longer need to have piano lessons. Her reaction: “You’re going to do what?” Serious discussion followed. My father, who had played cornet as a young man, came to my defense. Eventually it was agreed that I would join the band with the caveat that if I didn’t show success, I’d return to the piano. With this incentive, I worked doubly hard at the trombone.

Blowing the instrument and creating a tone seemed to come quite naturally to me, but I soon found a roadblock. The “homepage” for the B flat tenor trombone is the B flat

major scale. The second pitch of that scale is C, a pitch that requires the slide to be extended outward to the sixth of seven positions. Being a very small fourth grader, this proved to be impossible. But I knew I had to succeed, so I improvised. From first position B flat I threw the slide out and caught the crossbar with my toe, pulled it inward to fifth position D, then caught the crossbar with my hand and continued up the rest of the scale. I became adept enough that I soon outplayed the two larger boys in the section and was promoted to first chair. As I grew physically, I was able to turn my shoulders until I could reach even the seventh position. I was off to the races.

Later came some private lessons that led to tutelage by the principal trombonist in the fledgling Utah Symphony. His intense insistence on perfect intonation was one of the greatest things that ever happened to me. He bore it into my soul so I had that natural tool. I was soon described as a precocious young player, winning contests, appearing as soloist with every major band in the Salt Lake Valley including some dance bands that played in halls I was too young to frequent as a patron.

During my sophomore year in high school I was accepted into the band, the orchestra, the A cappella choir, the pep band, and every other activity that required a trombone or a voice. So music was my life. And I did passable work in the required academic classes. About midyear, the new music director and conductor of the Utah Symphony, Maurice Abravanel, made a familiarization tour of the valley high schools to identify promising students he felt should be encouraged to continue their musical studies. The future of music in the community was one of his great concerns. A few of us were invited to play for him. Some of us were told that we might have a shot at the Utah Symphony if we worked hard. Life was good—even without the piano!

Then, between my junior and senior years my parents received a church administrative assignment to far-off New Zealand. You guessed it. My reaction was, “You want me to do what?” Soon my comfortable “trombonesque” world morphed into a scenario of short pants, knee socks, a beanie cap, and a British style education at Auckland Boys Grammar School. The curriculum was classic European. There was no music program and there was little social activity. I was confronted with more hard academics than I had ever experienced. I used my trombone sporadically in church activities, and I appeared once as “the American Boy” guest with a jazz band on a local

radio show. After some searching, I found a British Brass Band in the area, but it didn't scratch my musical itch in the same way. The magic was gone. I lost interest. The fulcrum of my life at that time, the trombone, languished in its case, gathering dust, while I obediently hit the books and tried to keep up with my more capable classmates.

Here's where the question, "How did you become director of the Tabernacle Choir" comes into play:

To begin, I'll quote the words of a wise friend:

"...creating something under inspiration is often a matter of bringing long-range preparation and enlightenment to a particular opportunity." (Michael Moody)

*Allow me to repeat for emphasis.*

The rest of my discussion will deal with my process of preparation and enlightenment.

We Latter-day Saints sometimes forget that the Holy Spirit is operative among all God's creations. Because we are given the opportunity to receive the Holy Ghost, we are sometimes loathe to acknowledge that the Holy Ghost, at specific times and in specific places, also falls upon some who have not received the laying on of hands. To illustrate this, go back with me to the year 1881. A convention of Maori tribal leaders met at a village near Masterton, New Zealand. The central purpose of their meeting was this question:

"If all Christianity is of Christ, why are not all Christians affiliated with but one Christian church."

These great native leaders were asking, which is the one church? Which has the power of God unto salvation for the Maori race?

After much debate, the question was put to Paora Potangaroa, the wisest and most learned chief among them. His one word answer to them was "taihoa", which means simply, "wait", or "wait a little while." He then left the assembly and for three days he fasted and prayed. When he returned he said,

"My friends, the church for the Maori people has not yet come among us. You will recognize it when it comes. Its missionaries will travel in pairs. They will come from the rising sun. They will visit in our homes. They will learn our

language and teach us the gospel in our own tongue. When they pray they will raise their right hands.”

Later that same year the missionaries did come, and in succeeding years every detail of the covenant Potangaroa made with his people that day was fulfilled.

I've shared this history because it provides the context for what comes next. Those of us who've spent time among the Polynesians have heard many stories about great spiritual leaders, in and outside the Church; leaders who possessed unusual powers of discernment and exercised them in a variety of ways. I, too, have such a story.

About a century ago, my father was a missionary in New Zealand. Since then, nearly a dozen of my relatives have served there. In 1951 I went to the Church Administration Building in Salt Lake City with my parents to be interviewed by Elder Matthew Cowley regarding my father's call to the presidency of the New Zealand Mission. During the interview Elder Cowley counseled my parents about many things; the importance of taking care of their health, some of the circumstances that existed in the mission, many of the hopes that the Brethren had for that land. He bore his testimony, and he shared his personal love for New Zealand and all its peoples. Then he turned to me. You're too young to remember Elder Cowley. He was a man of short stature. As he rocked back in his big leather chair, his short legs lifted off the floor and his feet dangled loosely in the air. Even though he had a grin on his face, his countenance and tone of voice were serious when he said, "Jerry, first I want you to take care of your mom and dad, then pray, then pay attention to your schooling, prepare to fill a mission, and *try to find out what the Lord has in store for you for the rest of your life.*" Then he gave us each a blessing. The only thing I remember from that blessing is that he counseled me to pay attention to what would happen to me, because this would be a pivotal time in my life. At that moment "***You want me to do what?***" became a central question. I even had to go home and look up the word "pivotal" to understand that this would be a turning point, a fulcrum for the rest of my life's experience.

This was a difficult time for me. I was barely seventeen years old. My parent's call changed the whole context of my life. My teachers and fellow musicians were disappointed that I was leaving, and I must admit that I felt a little betrayed by the circumstances. But having been raised by parents who were always active in the work of

the Lord, I took these events on faith, left friends, family and a girl friend and left for New Zealand.

What a transition!

- An ocean voyage that carried me from an intermountain fall to a “down under” spring.
- From a public school curriculum freely offering a variety musical experience to a British style all-boys school heavy on classic, European academics—and no music.
- From a culture of Jansen sweaters, pegged pants, and ox blood shoes to a school uniform of short trousers, knee socks, and a beanie cap.
- From a life full of sociality to a period of more diligent study and, unfortunately, relative isolation.

It was a hard first year, but one that changed me in many ways. I was at once disciplined to a more adult view of the world while being protected from some of the follies of youth. And I survived.

After the school year ended, I was called on a labor mission at the Church College building site near Hamilton. One of the assignments given me by the project director was to organize a recreation program for the labor camp. A chorus seemed a logical activity for labor missionaries, so we made a tentative beginning. None of you are old enough to remember the old red book of MIA songs. We had it and our first song was “Mammy’s Little Baby Loves Short’nin’ Bread”. As our repertoire expanded, we sang for Church events and even ventured into the community on occasion.

Without my knowledge someone enrolled the choir in a competition at the Winter Show in Hamilton, an event that is similar to a county fair. I wasn’t too thrilled about the idea of being judged along with the animals and vegetables, but I reluctantly agreed, and we participated. We performed well and were awarded the first prize from among the several choirs who represented surrounding communities, Maori villages and some local schools.

During the award ceremony that followed, each choir was given a verbal evaluation by one of the judges. Since we were awarded the first prize, the principal

judge spoke to us himself. He was an elderly, gray-haired Maori gentleman, dressed in a three-piece suit adorned with a beautiful gold watch chain. Although he stood leaning on a carved cane, his bearing and articulate speech rivaled that of any English gentleman. His station as a Maori chief or tohunga, like Paora Potangaro, was evident. He wore a feathered cape, greenstone ornaments and other totems of royalty. A sash across his chest displayed ribbons awarded for his national service as a member of the New Zealand parliament. *He was an imposing sight!*

He spoke to us in detail about our performance and the importance of continuing to refine certain elements of our presentation. Then, pointing one hand to the choir and a strong finger toward me, he said, “And watch this young man’s hands. They are hands of destiny.” I was stunned.

*“You want them to do what?”* Not only was I embarrassed and shaken, I was also puzzled by his words. They haunted me through the rest of my labor mission, through my proselyting mission, through my university education at BYU, through my years as a public school teacher, through my years in graduate school, and through my years on the faculty at the University of Utah. I had little vision of what that Maori chieftain saw in an eighteen year old. Something had been revealed to him that was later revealed to my wife, both having received the message long before I had any understanding of his simple statement, “they are hands of destiny”.

When I completed the work mission at the college, I was called on a two year, full-time mission right there in New Zealand. My parents completed their service several months before my mission was complete. My last months in New Zealand were spent in the mission office doing administrative work and driving for the new mission president. Upon returning to the United States after four years, I found my home environment to be very strange and unsettling. I was anxious to enter BYU and get on with my life.

Three weeks before leaving for BYU, a few remaining friends in my home ward suggested a date night of dancing to the music of Les Brown and His Band of Renown at the Lagoon resort. I declined. Although I loved that band and wanted to hear them, I had spent most of my teen years playing for dances. I was not a dancer. In the second place, I didn’t know any girls! One of them suggested I take a blind date. “No way.” Incidentally, her reaction was the same way when she was approached. The

girl who made the suggestion had sung in the summer festival productions at the University of Utah with the target girl. For brevity, neither she nor I were much interested, but after coaxing and cajoling we agreed. It was kismet. Three dates later I left for BYU, she fearing that I would never be seen or heard from again because I was coming to the marriage factory. But during the following months I found rides back to Salt Lake City at every opportunity to court her.

In those days hitchhiking was not the taboo that it is now. In fact, it was something of an adventure. As a student I carried not a backpack, but a brief case. On its side I had displayed a decal—a large block “Y” that signaled my station as a student. I’d go out on the highway and put that briefcase down and it wasn’t long before someone would pick me up! One day the driver of a big, black Cadillac stopped and I got in the car with President Ernest L. Wilkinson, the president of BYU. Those of you who didn’t know him might not realize that although he was small in stature, he was a most imposing figure in the life of the community in general, and at BYU in particular. During the hour-long journey I was interrogated by him like no interview I’ve had since. He probed every element of my life, and then asked, “What are you planning to do with your education?” When I told him I planned to teach school, he asked if I intended to get any graduate degrees. I explained that if I made it through college I’d be satisfied. I’d be the first in my family to achieve a college degree. I thought I’d be happy in the teaching profession and didn’t really see how graduate school would open any new doors for me. Then he said, “It may not, but if you don’t look through other doors, you will never know the extent of your possibilities.” Can you guess my next thought? “You want me to do what?” His words didn’t mean much to me then, but they proved to be prophetic.

My hitchhiking efforts were not in vain. JoAnn and I were married the next June and she became my primary cheerleader and motivator, and the impetus behind my growing understanding of what my life could be.

I must say, at this point, that I never was a brilliant student. Earlier in life I’d had some success as a musician, but only in a very limited area. At university, I discovered that to be a musician meant mastering a wide range of disciplines. Most of them didn’t come easy to me. But my years of experience in New Zealand, where I coped with new environments and strange circumstances, had given me a kind of dogged resilience.

Plodding became my modus operandi. My struggle with academics was rewarded by scholarships, teaching assistantships and finally, graduation---cum laude.

While in New Zealand I had learned to play guitar a little. I used this to accompany myself as a ballad singer. At BYU this led me to the Program Bureau. This, in turn, led me to the A Cappella Choir and an instant romance with the choral art. Although I had resumed my studies with the trombone, it had lost its earlier luster. Nevertheless, when I received greetings from the President of the United States for a two-year diversion in the Army, both the trombone and the guitar went with me. My war stories are centered in my experiences in an Army Band and Special Services Entertainment. It was a period that seemed, at the time, to be an inconvenience, but it provided a broadening window to my world. I found that playing in military parades, officer's clubs, and traveling in touring shows seemed glamorous for a time, but I soon tired of the dead-end life style. I was anxious to get on with my education.

On my return to BYU, I completed a Composite Bachelor of Arts degree in Music Education and began my teaching career in the Murray, Utah school district, followed by positions in the Granite and Davis districts. Since my moves from one district to another were by invitation, I assumed that I was successful and could depend on a future in the public schools. Then came my next "You want me to do what?" epiphany. A telephone call from my primary mentor at BYU, who was then a professor at the University of Utah, invited me to consider a master's degree in conducting. After some soul searching, I accepted a limited teaching assistantship and the offer of part time work to support my family.

As my own education proceeded, my wife accepted opportunities to study with faculty members who soon discovered her talent. The local demand for her performances grew, calling more and more attention to her unique capabilities. Nevertheless, she insisted on maintaining her priorities of wife, mother, then singer. Near the end of my master's study, some of her admirers dropped the next bombshell into our lives. "You want us to do what? —After nearly twelve years of marriage, with a seven year old son, a full household to dissolve, you want us to apply for dual Fulbright Scholarships to study in Germany?" It made no sense.

Well, we did. We were accepted, and we went to study at the Music Academy of the Rhineland in Cologne. The impetus to accept this challenge came from that “hands of destiny” pronouncement and a later spiritual prodding. While attending a session in the Salt Lake Temple I received a vivid impression that I was to seek a doctorate. So through the lens of my “You want me to do what?” hesitations, we embarked on a difficult but enlightening year of study in Germany. Here is where a great crossroads came into our lives. My wife could have parlayed her experience there into an opera career in Europe—the opportunities were clearly evident. In fact, we had several professors pushing her, we had two or three agents who were working on her, and we had an exploratory contract from an opera house sitting on the table. She could have had a very prominent career, singing in the opera houses of Europe. But we were being driven by another “destiny”. Through fasting and prayer we discovered that our future was not to be in Europe. I applied for admittance to several doctoral programs. We accepted to only one that had not offered financial assistance simply because the school had a reputation for putting students through their program in a timely manner. It helped also that the faculty at the University of Oregon included two professors whose textbooks I had used in my earlier teaching experience. Fortunately, I had some G. I. bill education benefits, and was able to use earlier life experience to work as a journeyman painter on the university paint crew to support my family. Later I received a graduate teaching fellowship, largely on the strength of my prior teaching experience and the prestige of the Fulbright study abroad.

Now, here it comes again! “You want me to do what?” I received simultaneous calls to teach at the Institute of Religion and to serve on the stake high council. This was graduate school! I was surrounded in a class of much younger students. Many were on highly endowed, full-ride scholarships, and they were brilliant! Some of my advisors thought I was crazy, and I couldn’t mount a very convincing defense. But we took these challenges prayerfully and with the same faith that carried us through other daunting opportunities. The result? I finished my study program on schedule and *before* most of my classmates. Take that as a lesson: your studies are important, but your life serving the Lord is more important.

After I received a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Oregon, the University of Utah music department, in a moment weakness, hired me, causing me

to feel that my future in academia was secured. A call to serve on the General Music Committee of the Church with responsibility for preliminary studies for a new hymnal generated a taproot of permanency in my view of life. In my third year at the university, I was appointed associate department chair, slowly moving my career out of music education and choral performance into administration. It was about this time that I began to understand the meaning of President Wilkinson's advice about the potential of opening doors. But there was yet another door that I had not anticipated. There was yet another "You want me to do what?" question leading to the opening of many more doors that had yet to be opened.

A call from President Nathan L. Tanner's office summoned me to the Church Administration Building for an interview. All kinds of scenarios went through my mind, mostly centering on the work of the music committee. I had visions of my Church membership being severed, although I couldn't think why.

I was stunned when asked if I would accept a call as the associate director of the Tabernacle Choir. Robert Bowden and I were installed as associate directors of the Choir and Mormon Youth Symphony and Chorus with Jay Welch as the music director. We took up our duties in August of 1974. In November, Brother Bowden was named director of the youth organizations, and I remained with the Tabernacle Choir. Brother Welch resigned abruptly in December, and I was faced with the most challenging "You want me to do what?" question of my life. "Will you accept a call as acting director of the Tabernacle Choir?" I was unaware that there had ever been an acting director of the Choir! What did it mean? How would this affect my growing career at the university? The arena was cluttered with emotion—disappointment and heartbreak over the departure of Brother Welch, who was much beloved. There were questions about what it meant for the Choir and what it meant for me. I sought counsel from my wife who reminded me of past inspirations. I sought counsel and a blessing from my aged father. I sought counsel from President Marion G. Romney who had been assigned to supervise this transition. And I sought counsel from the Lord. All agreed that this was indeed "my destiny". I was named acting director, and in April Conference, 1975, I was sustained as music director. In a few hours I began to understand that the experiences I had in New Zealand thirty years earlier were the beginnings of a course of preparation that would find its fulfillment

in a call to work with the Tabernacle Choir. If my destiny was to use these hands in a preordained way to further the work of the Lord upon the earth, if those early experiences in New Zealand that shaped and changed the direction of my life were a part of that plan, then that Maori tohunga was indeed inspired through the Holy Spirit to give me a message—a message that had been revealed to him. Much later that same message was revealed to my wife, long before I had any knowledge of what it meant.

The rest of my story might be prefaced by another question that's also difficult to answer.

“Brother Ottley, what did you do the rest of the week?”

But that's a story for another time. Over the next two years I was fazed out of my university involvement to become the first conductor of the Tabernacle Choir to be fully employed by the Church.

Now, what are the lessons to be learned from my odyssey? I use the word odyssey with emphasis on the “odd”! Some of you may have very clear ideas about where you want your life to go. Others are undecided. Still others of you haven't got a clue! But that's OK. Someone once said, “I've had it with reality. I want a fairy godmother!”

May I share with you a few bits of my wisdom, for what they're worth?

- Earlier I alluded to the fact that I was not a brilliant student, but I followed a steady, sometimes plodding path. Stay the course!
- Another secret is to simply show up! Be there, present in the moment, proving your dependability by giving a 100% to whatever is the task or opportunity.
- My life's path is evidence that there are powerful, often unseen, forces waiting for your arrival on the scene. Look and listen for those evidences.
- Be brave, take some chances, but only if you invite Providence to be your guide.

I'll close with some platitudes from sources that are much wiser than I. The Dalai Lama advises:

- Take into account that great love and great achievements involve great risk.
- When you lose, do not lose the lesson.

- Remember that not getting what you want is sometimes a wonderful stroke of luck.
- Learn the rules so you know how to break them properly.
- Open your arms to change, but do not let go of your values.
- Judge your success by what you had to give up to get it.

And in a different vein,

Plato says—to do is to be.

Socrates says---to be is to do

Sinatra says---Soo bee doo bee doo

Don't discount Sinatra. Don't get so serious that you forget to enjoy the fun along the way.

The atomic scientist Edward Teller counsels:

“When you come to the end of all the light you know, and it's time to step into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing that one of two things shall happen: either you will be given something to stand on or you will be taught to fly.”

And finally, repeating my friend's wisdom:

“...creating something under inspiration is often a matter of bringing long-range preparation and enlightenment to a particular opportunity.” (Michael Moody)