

Spiritual Crocodiles

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I speak today to the youth of the Church, the Aaronic Priesthood and the young women, and these wonderful young people in our choir. In order to teach a lesson not easily learned, I will relate an experience.

I have always been interested in animals and birds and when I was a little boy and the other children wanted to play cowboy, I wanted to go on safari to Africa and would pretend I was hunting the wild animals.

When I learned to read, I found books about birds and animals and came to know much about them. By the time I was in my teens I could identify most of the African animals. I could tell a klipspringer from an impala, or a gemsbok from wildebeest.

I always wanted to go to Africa and see the animals, and finally that opportunity came. Sister Packer and I were assigned to tour the South Africa Mission with President and Sister Howard Badger. We had a very strenuous schedule and had dedicated eight chapels in seven days, scattered across that broad continent.

President Badger was vague about the schedule for September 10th. (That happens to be my birthday.) We were in Rhodesia, planning, I thought, to return to Johannesburg, South Africa. But he had other plans, and we landed at Victoria Falls.

“There is a game reserve some distance from here,” he explained, “and I have rented a car, and tomorrow, your birthday, we are going to spend seeing the African animals.”

Now I might explain that the game reserves in Africa are unusual. The people are put in cages, and the animals are left to run free. That is, there are compounds where the park visitors check

in at night and are locked behind high fences until after daylight they are allowed to drive about, but no one is allowed out of his car.

We arrived in the park in the late afternoon. By some mistake, there were not enough cabins for all the visitors, and they were all taken when we arrived. The head ranger indicated that they had a cabin in an isolated area about eight miles from the compound and we could spend the night there.

Because of a delay in getting our evening meal, it was long after dark when we left the compound. We found the turnoff and had gone up the narrow road just a short distance when the engine stalled. We found a flashlight and I stepped out to check under the hood, thinking that there must be a loose connection or something. As the light flashed on the dusty road, the first thing I saw was lion tracks!

Back in the car, we determined to content ourselves with spending the night there! Fortunately, however, an hour or two later we were rescued by the driver of a gas truck who had left the compound late because of a problem. We awakened the head ranger and in due time we were settled in our cabin. In the morning they brought us back to the compound.

We had no automobile, and without telephones there was no way to get a replacement until late in the day. We faced the disappointment of sitting around the compound all day. Our one day in the park was ruined and, for me, the dream of a lifetime was gone.

I talked with a young ranger, and he was surprised that I knew many of the African birds. Then he volunteered to rescue us.

"We are building a new lookout over a water hole about twenty miles from the compound," he said. "It is not quite finished, but it is safe. I will take you out there with a lunch, and when your car comes late this afternoon we will bring it out to you. You may see as many animals, or even more, than if you were driving around."

On the way to the lookout he volunteered to show us some lions. He turned off through the brush and before long located a group of seventeen lions all sprawled out asleep and drove right up among them.

We stopped at a water hole to watch the animals come to drink. It was very dry that season and there was not much water, really just muddy spots. When the elephants stepped into the soft mud the water would seep into the depression and the animals would drink from the elephant tracks.

The antelope, particularly, were very nervous. They would approach the mud hole, only to turn and run away in great fright. I could see there were no lions about and asked the guide why they didn't drink. His answer, and this is the lesson, was "Crocodiles."

I knew he must be joking and asked him seriously, "What is the problem?" The answer again: "Crocodiles."

"Nonsense," I said. "There are no crocodiles out there. Anyone can see that."

I thought he was having some fun at the expense of his foreign game expert, and finally I asked him to tell us the truth. Now I remind you that I was not uninformed. I had read many books. Besides, anyone would know that you can't hide a crocodile in an elephant track.

He could tell I did not believe him and determined, I suppose, to teach me a lesson. We drove to another location where the car was on an embankment above the muddy hole where we could look down. "There," he said. "See for yourself."

I couldn't see anything except the mud, a little water, and the nervous animals in the distance. Then all at once I saw it!—a large crocodile, settled in the mud, waiting for some unsuspecting animal to get thirsty enough to come for a drink.

Suddenly I became a believer! When he could see I was willing to listen, he continued with the lesson. "There are crocodiles all over the park," he said, "not just in the rivers. We don't have any water without a crocodile somewhere near it, and you'd better count on it."

The guide was kinder to me than I deserved. My "know-it-all" challenge to his first statement, "crocodiles," might have brought an invitation, "Well, go out and see for yourself!"

I could see for myself that there were no crocodiles. I was so sure of myself I think I might have walked out just to see what was there. Such an arrogant approach could have been fatal! But he was patient enough to teach me.

My young friends, I hope you'll be wiser in talking to your guides than I was on that occasion. That smart-aleck idea that I knew everything really wasn't worthy of me, nor is it worthy of you. I'm not very proud of it, and I think I'd be ashamed to tell you about it except that telling you may help you.

Those ahead of you in life have probed about the water holes a bit and raise a voice of warning about crocodiles. Not just the big, gray lizards that can bite you to pieces, but *spiritual crocodiles*, infinitely more dangerous, and more deceptive and less visible, even, than those well-camouflaged reptiles of Africa.

These **spiritual crocodiles** can kill or mutilate your souls. They can destroy your peace of mind and the peace of mind of those who love you. Those are the ones to be warned against, and there is hardly a watering place in all of mortality now that is not infested with them.

On another trip to Africa I discussed this experience with a game ranger in another park. He assured me that you can *indeed* hide a crocodile in an elephant track—one big enough to bite a man in two.

He then showed me a place where a tragedy had occurred. A young man from England was working in the hotel for the season. In spite of constant and repeated warnings, he went through the compound fence to check something across a shallow splash of water that didn't cover his tennis shoes.

"He wasn't two steps in," the ranger said, "before a crocodile had him, and we could do nothing to save him."

It seems almost to be against our natures, particularly when we are young, to accept much guidance from others. But, young people, there are times when, regardless of how much we think we know or how much we think we want to do something, that our very existence depends on paying attention to the guides.

Now, it is a gruesome thing to think about that young man who was eaten by the crocodile. But that is not, by any means, the worst thing that could happen. There are moral and spiritual things far worse even than the thought of being chewed to pieces by a monstrous lizard.

Fortunately there are guides enough in life to prevent these things from happening if we are willing to take counsel now and again.

Some of us are appointed now, as you will be soon, to be guides and rangers. Now we don't use those titles very much. We go under the titles of parents—father and mother—bishop, leader, adviser. Our assignment is to see that you get through mortality without being injured by these **spiritual crocodiles**.

All of the training and activity in the Church has as its central purpose a desire to see you, our young people, free and independent and secure, both spiritually and temporally.

If you will listen to the counsel of your parents and your teachers and your leaders when you are young, you can learn how to follow the best guide of all—the whisperings of the Holy Spirit. That is individual revelation. There is a process through which we can be alerted to spiritual dangers. Just as surely as that guide warned me, you can receive signals alerting you to the **spiritual crocodiles** that lurk ahead.

If we can train you to listen to these spiritual communications, you will be protected from these crocodiles of life. You can learn what it feels like to be guided from on high. This inspiration can come to you now, in all of your activities, in school, and dating—not just in your Church assignments.

Learn how to pray and how to receive answers to your prayers. When you pray over some things, you must patiently wait a long, long time before you will receive an answer. Some prayers, for your own safety, must be answered immediately, and some promptings will even come when you haven't prayed at all.

Once you really determine to follow that guide, your testimony will grow and you will find provisions set out along the way in unexpected places, as evidence that someone knew that you would be traveling that way.

The basic exercise for you to perform in your youth to become spiritually strong and to become independent lies in obedience to your guides. If you will follow them and do it willingly, you can learn to trust those delicate, sensitive, spiritual promptings. You will learn that they always, invariably, lead you to do that which is righteous.

Now, my young friends, I would like to make reference to another experience, one I think of often but one I seldom talk about. I shall not mention it in detail; I only want to refer to it. It happened many years ago when I was perhaps not quite as young as you are now, and it had to do with my decision to follow that guide.

I knew what agency was and knew how important it was to be individual and to be independent, to be free. I somehow knew there was one thing the Lord would never take from me, and that was my free agency. I would not surrender my agency to any being but to Him! I determined that I would *give* Him the one thing that He would never take—my agency. I decided, by myself, that from that time on I would do things His way.

That was a great trial for me, for I thought I was giving away the most precious thing I possessed. I was not wise enough in my youth to know that because I exercised my agency and decided myself, I was not *losing* it. It was *strengthened*!

I learned from that experience the meaning of the scripture: "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." ([John 8:31-32](#).)

I have not been quite as frightened of **spiritual crocodiles** since then, because I have been alerted on many occasions as to where they were lurking.

I have been nipped a time or two and on occasion have needed some spiritual first aid, but have been otherwise saved because I have been warned.

Fortunately, there is spiritual first aid for those who have been bitten. The bishop of the ward is the guide in charge of this first aid. He can also treat those who have been badly morally mauled by these **spiritual crocodiles**—and see them completely healed.

That experience in Africa was another reminder for me to follow the Guide. I follow Him because I want to. Through the other experience I came to know the Guide. I bear witness that He lives, that Jesus is the Christ. I know that He has a body of flesh and bones, that He directs

this Church, and His purpose is to see all of us guided safely back into His presence. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.