

“Here Am I”

ROBERT L. GARDNER

As I begin I would like to give special thanks to my wife and my best friend, Janice, who has been such a wonderful companion and influence in my life. Sweetheart, I love you with all my heart and thank you for being you.

As I prayed about and pondered what I should say today, I turned to a study of our Savior’s life, beginning with the first recorded knowledge we have of Him. In Abraham 3:22 we read about the premortal Grand Council that was held in heaven. There God the Father laid out the plan whereby the world would be created, and we would be sent to prove ourselves.

Then the Lord asked that simple but critical question:

Whom shall I send? And one answered like unto the Son of Man: Here am I send me. And another answered and said: Here am I, send me. And the Lord said: I will send the first. [Abraham 3:27]

As I contemplate this scripture, I am impressed by the fact that Jehovah’s act of stepping forward and proclaiming, “Here am I,” was completely voluntary. He was not coerced, for that would have been contrary to God’s will and the eternal law of agency. Rather, God asked the simple question, “Whom shall

I send?” In response, our Savior took the initiative to step forward to take upon Himself our sins.

In taking this initiative, the Savior committed Himself to be personally involved in our lives. He knew that He couldn’t pay or entice someone else to do the task. Only His own personal involvement—His sacrifice—was sufficient to pay the price.

This account in Abraham contains another extremely critical message for us. A second spirit came forward saying:

Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor. [Moses 4:1]

Nevertheless, Jehovah was chosen because, as God explained to Moses,

My Beloved Son, which was my Beloved and Chosen from the beginning, said unto me — Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever. [Moses 4:2]

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What a difference! Jesus Christ stepped forward because of His infinite love and His devotion to His Father. He and His Father were One because of His faithfulness and steadfast devotion to do His Father's will, no matter the circumstances. Only He was capable of paying the price. The other spirit was a complete fraud who wanted things his own way and all the glory for himself. He was willing to lie, bend the rules, break eternal laws, coerce and trample on others, and ignore the Father's will.

As I study and ponder the scriptures and many talks and articles by latter-day prophets, I realize that the term *integrity* is used many times to describe one who loves the Lord with all his or her heart and whose whole life, thoughts, and actions are consistent with the Father's will.

Thus, this account of the premortal Grand Council illustrates three principles: (1) initiative, (2) involvement, and (3) integrity, which serve as a blueprint for us in our daily lives.

Initiative

We are all familiar with D&C 58:26–28, which states:

For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward.

Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness;

For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward.

This is a very powerful scripture, but it is also one that causes us consternation and feelings of guilt. Just how do we take the initiative to do good, especially when we're so pressured with our studies, our jobs, and our families? We rationalize that perhaps now is not the time. Perhaps we should take the initiative to

do good tomorrow. Yet the scripture doesn't exempt students, faculty, or other people from its direction. President Gordon B. Hinckley has stated:

*You want to be happy? Forget yourself and get lost in this great cause, and bend your efforts to helping people. Cultivate a spirit of forgiveness in your heart against any who might have offended you. Look to the Lord and live, and work and lift and serve His sons and daughters. You will come to know happiness as you've never known it before. I don't care how old you are, how young you are. You can lift people and help them. Heaven knows there are so very, very many people in this world who need help. [Mike Cannon, "Missionary Theme Was Pervasive During Visit of President Hinckley," Liverpool England Fireside, 31 August 1995, in *Church News*, 9 September 1995, 4]*

In this quote President Hinckley tells us all to take the initiative to get involved. He does not say that we must do something big and overwhelming. We are to do now what we have the power to do. If we do, the world will be better, and we will be happier.

How then do we take the initiative to help others, when we're under such tremendous time pressures? I think one excellent way of doing so is to attempt to put ourselves in the other person's shoes—to see the world from the other person's perspective. This can be a roommate, family member, friend, or simply someone that we heard or found out about. We must get out of ourselves and see things from a different perspective. As we prayerfully open our eyes and change our perspective, we can begin to actually *feel* and understand what the other person is feeling and experiencing. If we don't, wonderful opportunities to really make a difference, even with relatively little effort, can be lost.

A few months ago some old friends from my college days visited me. They had come to BYU to their daughter's graduation, and since they

were here, they took the time to look me up. We had lost contact with each other because our lives had taken different paths. I was greatly saddened to hear that their daughter's last year here at BYU was a very difficult one. She had suffered from some health problems but also from great loneliness. There had been many opportunities for roommates, home teachers, visiting teachers, and others to simply sit and listen or to merely say hi. Yet few had taken the opportunity to do so. That simple act would have made a tremendous difference in her life. Unfortunately, others are here who are facing the same loneliness.

Contrast this experience with one my daughters had. Our granddaughter, Kayla, was born in October 2002 with an extremely serious heart defect. She needed to have open-heart surgery immediately, or she would suffocate. The first surgery was not totally successful, and so within a week a second surgery was necessary. During the second surgery the sutures around Kayla's little aorta tore, and the doctors worked frantically to keep her from bleeding to death. Periodically a nurse would come out of the operating room to keep us notified of her situation. The news was always extremely bad.

During the surgery two of our daughters tried to continue on with their lives here at BYU. When Jill got the message that Kayla probably would not make it, she went over to the Harris Fine Arts Building to find Kim to tell her the news. As the two girls cried and hugged each other, a young man noticed them and sensed their distress. Quietly he stepped over to them and simply said; "I hope you feel better and that everything will be okay." He then handed them a BYU Men's Chorus CD that contains wonderful, healing music. That young man didn't know my daughters, but he kept his eyes and his heart open, was sensitive to the Spirit, and took the initiative to act. His simple action gave them comfort and support. Fortunately, through the prayers and faith of many, and because it's our Father's will, today

20-month-old Kayla loves to sing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" and to give her Grandpa kisses!

These experiences and others like them have caused me to examine my own life and to prayerfully sharpen my perspective as I take the initiative to be aware of others' needs. I've also encouraged my students to open their eyes and take the initiative to bless family, friends, and others through quiet acts of service.

Involvement

The second principle that the Savior demonstrated in that Grand Council was personal involvement. He volunteered to take upon Himself our sins. His involvement required a caring, loving attitude. It meant getting involved for the right reason. Without this attitude and reason, all efforts would have been meaningless.

I believe the concept of involvement encompasses even more than merely going through the motions. I think this is the concept that my dad was trying to teach me and my brothers when we were growing up in a small farming community in southeastern Arizona. At the time the Church in Duncan owned a large cotton farm. Because the weeds always seemed to grow faster than the cotton, the priesthood brethren were often called to hoe out the weeds. For a young boy, in the hot Arizona sun, that was no small task. Every time the request came, Dad would work shoulder-to-shoulder with his sons as we moved slowly up and down the rows of cotton.

When I got older I asked Dad why he just didn't hire someone to fulfill his obligation. After all, his personal time was much more valuable than what it would have cost to hire a farmhand. Dad simply smiled and replied, "Son, it is because the welfare farm needs us, and we need the welfare farm." I learned that service rendered with personal involvement becomes much more beneficial, both to the recipient and to the giver. When we render

service with the proper attitude and for the right reasons, we benefit from being involved because we are expanding and developing our love and charity for others.

Let me tell you about some individuals who have truly learned and applied these concepts in their own lives. Melanie Hall and Marty Tidwell were typical BYU students. Like you, they were extremely busy with their studies and their jobs. But they both found time to take the initiative to get involved. Among other things they were involved with Special Olympics, field trips with the American Fork Training School, and BYU Management Society community clean-up projects. Melanie was from Durango, Colorado; and Marty was from Prineville, Oregon. Melanie's uncle was Marty's home ward bishop in Oregon. So one year Melanie's aunt invited her to their home for Christmas, and she arranged for Melanie to ride to Oregon with Marty. Thus, Melanie tells me their first "date" was prearranged by her aunt and was 14 hours long! They eventually fell in love and married, and after graduation they worked for a while in Portland, Oregon, and then moved to Singapore, where they work today.

Several years ago a woman in their ward, Leearne DiMichiel, was trying to adopt a baby girl from an orphanage in Cambodia, and she asked Melanie to accompany her there to help clear up some medical issues with the baby. Before leaving, they made baby quilts and collected toys and clothes for the children at the orphanage. But once there they met two little boys who changed their lives forever.

One was 18-month-old Ratana, who was very near death. He had both AIDS and tuberculosis, and at the time they saw him, he was nothing more than skin and bones. He was lying on a towel he had just vomited on, and he was naked except for a dirty cloth tied around his waist as a diaper. When Melanie and Leearne tried to get close to him, he would cover his mouth with his bony hands, whim-

per, and turn away from them as if to say, "You mustn't look at me. I'm too sad." They sensed that he knew something was wrong with him, and he seemed embarrassed for anyone to pay any attention to him. The other baby, Han, was four months old and weighed only four and a half pounds. When Melanie asked the ladies working at the orphanage what was wrong with Han, they repeatedly said, "No mama, no papa, not enough milk." With that response, the two women knew what they had to do. They agreed to pay for private care for both Ratana and Han. Immediately both boys were cleaned up and taken care of. Melanie tells me:

It was such a moving thing to watch Ratana take it all in. He went from being a child left in the corner with nothing to a child who was getting the attention he deserved. He was calm and serene as the ladies fixed him up. He had a peaceful, relieved look on his face.

Less than a week after the two women returned home, Ratana died—but since the day that they'd found him he had been dressed, fed, cared for, and loved. What a blessing to him and to them that they had taken the initiative to become involved. Because of this experience, Melanie, Leearne, and others sponsored other critically ill babies. They even hired an artist to paint murals of nature scenes and Disney characters on the walls of the orphanage.

Now what about Han? Well, Melanie and Leearne introduced him to Sister White, the wife of the mission president. She agreed to visit Han frequently and serve as a surrogate grandmother. He responded well to the love and attention and was eventually adopted by a family in Hawaii.

This was only the beginning. Over the years, as they continued their efforts with fundraisers and baby showers for these children, word seemed to spread magically and many other individuals and organizations became involved. The work continues today. Three

years ago the Tidwells adopted an 11-year-old Cambodian girl themselves. With her adoption, Melanie and Marty needed to redirect their focus to their new daughter. Even though she is not as involved today with the Cambodian efforts, Melanie continues helping in other areas. She and several sisters in the Singapore Stake visit residents of the Singapore Leprosy Home. Although the residents are completely cured of leprosy, they suffer from deformities and disfigurements; thus, many have not left the home in over 30 years. I quote one small part of an experience Melanie had there:

I had a delightful interchange with one woman. She spoke pretty good English. After I talked with her a little bit, she turned to me and, with a big smile on her face, said, "Why are you here? Don't you have any friends?" We laughed together. I asked if I could have my photo taken with her. She said no, because she was too old and ugly. I said, "Maybe that is what you think, but I think you have a beautiful heart." She agreed to be in the photo.

Thank you, Melanie, Marty, and Learne for following the Savior's example to truly become personally involved.

Integrity

As the Savior has demonstrated, initiative and involvement must be undertaken with integrity. Integrity includes honesty in both word and deed, even when it might hurt. Children, for example, are totally honest. Just a few months ago, Janice and I took our grandkids out to dinner. When the server brought the bill, she also brought some lollipops for the kids. One of them was green, which just happens to be the favorite color of our four-year-old grandson, Spencer. With a smile he took the lollipop and exclaimed, "Look, my lollipop is the same color as my shirt!" Then he picked up his fork and thoughtfully declared, "Look, my fork is the same color as Grandpa's hair!"

In the July 2003 *Ensign*, Elder L. Tom Perry stated:

*What is the meaning of integrity? We can find several definitions in the dictionary: rigid adherence to a code or standard of values; moral soundness, especially as it relates to steadfastness to truth, purpose, responsibility, or trust; moral and ethical strength; or the quality of being whole, complete, undivided. [L. Tom Perry, "Staying Power," *Ensign*, July 2003, 42]*

Note that the concept of integrity encompasses both the principle of honesty as well as the concept of completeness, or wholeness. Through his desire and unshaken steadfastness to God's will, Jesus Christ and the Father became One—complete and undivided.

Integrity is definitely an endangered concept today. I am greatly saddened by the accounting and other professional scandals that have come to light over the last several years. I applaud the efforts spent on shoring up the statutes and regulations in an attempt to prevent future problems. These certainly will help. But legislation and regulation, while necessary, simply are not sufficient for a society to operate properly. Legislation and regulation are not a substitute for integrity.

President Hinckley put it this way:

*What was once controlled by the moral and ethical standards of the people, we now seek to handle by public law. And so the statutes multiply, enforcement agencies consume ever-increasing billions, and prison facilities are constantly expanded—but the torrent of dishonesty pours on and grows in volume. [Gordon B. Hinckley, "We Believe in Being Honest," *Ensign*, October 1990, 4]*

When I first read this statement from President Hinckley about statutes multiplying, my reaction was, "President Hinckley's been reading the Internal Revenue Code!" Talk about multiplying statutes! For example, the

definition of the word *employment* in the code is only one sentence long. Now that sounds okay until you realize that sentence goes on for five pages and contains 21 paragraphs!

I once had a conversation with a friend who is not of our faith. As we discussed the principle of tithing, he stated that his church defined tithing as 10 percent of one's income "after necessary living expenses." He went on to indicate that his church was studying whether vacations should be considered "a necessary living expense." How grateful I am for a tithing system that is properly based upon personal integrity. If it were not, I'm afraid that the "tithing code" would rival the Internal Revenue Code in length and complexity! Yet, note the tremendous responsibility that is ours to ensure that the system is whole. How grateful I am for parents who, through their example, taught that the question to ask when considering tithing is, "Have I paid enough?" Now I'm not suggesting that we should ask the same question in all of our business dealings and when we pay taxes. But we must apply the same strict standard of integrity.

Let me give you a simple example. The tax law clearly states that expenses incurred while traveling away from home are deductible as business expenses only if "the trip is primarily related to the taxpayer's trade or business" (Treas. Reg. §1.162-2). Thus, the reason the taxpayer takes the trip becomes the critical issue. Sadly, I know individuals among us who, with a wink and a smile, proudly declare that every vacation they take is now deductible because somewhere along the way they just might have a business discussion with someone. The same logic is used to make the family pet a deductible watchdog. Without an audit of all taxpayers, the system itself simply cannot eliminate such abuses. Changing the tax system is not the answer, because without integrity on the part of taxpayers, the new system would also suffer the consequences of unethical behavior.

This concept applies in all areas of our lives. Certainly, we must follow the law in all of our actions. But, if we rely solely upon a strict interpretation of the letter of the law rather than on our own personal integrity, society becomes much more complex and difficult—even self-destructive. One may outwardly appear to act or speak correctly by not technically breaking the law, stealing, cheating, or lying. But if the individual is improperly motivated, he or she may not be acting with integrity. Do we focus on only the "letter of the law," or do we live our lives with integrity? I am greatly saddened to read in the local newspaper about young men and young women who are completely willing to compromise their morality as long as they don't "go all the way" as they interpret it. Yet, they lie to themselves and others, claiming to still live by strong moral values (see Lucinda Dillon Kindead, "Sexual Attitudes," *Deseret News*, 30 June 2004, 10).

Through this lack of integrity they withdraw themselves from the Spirit and lose its guiding influence. Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin has stated:

*The consummate reward of integrity is the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost. (See D&C 121:46.) The Holy Ghost does not attend us when we do evil. But when we do what is right, he can dwell with us and guide us in all we do. [Joseph B. Wirthlin, "Personal Integrity," *Ensign*, May 1990, 33]*

Certainly throughout our lives we repeatedly have opportunities to step forward and declare, "Here am I!" Some of these times are formal, such as when we receive a mission call, have a temple recommend interview with our bishop, or receive a calling in the Church. As we're reminded in the hymn "A Poor Wayfarer Man of Grief," other times may come to us unexpectedly (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 29).

Of course, the time will come for all of us when we ultimately must present ourselves

before our Maker, stripped of any pretense, and simply declare, "Here am I." The outcome of that experience is largely dependent upon how well we follow our Redeemer's example

as He stepped forward with initiative, involvement, and integrity.

May we all do as He has done is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.