

## *Selective Attitudes and the Happy Life*

REX E. AND JANET G. LEE

**J**anet: Several months ago while Rex and I were attending a BYU regional conference, we sat on the stand overlooking a sea of students. My mind whirled back over the years, remembering treasured moments from my own BYU experiences. I recalled having heart-to-heart talks with my roommates, walking through gently falling snow on the way home from the library, and reading or getting ready to go out without the responsibility of house and children. I also remembered feeling the sense of accomplishment when a paper was completed or an exam behind me, falling in love, and graduation.

When the meeting was over and Rex and I were on our way home, I remarked to him how much I missed those good old days. I asked Rex, “Don’t you wish you could go back and live a few of those carefree days again?” My husband, who is more realistic than I am, and very much more practical, laughed and replied, “I think you have selective memory.”

**Rex:** Selective indeed. Of course it was nice to get those papers turned in, or to perform well on a test. But what about the hours of drudgery that went into those papers? And what about the times when the test performance left you wondering why you ever gave

up your newspaper route? That probably never happened to you, my friend, but it certainly did to me. And how about the winter semester when every morning I had to leave an hour early to walk to a seven o’clock class at Page School because we couldn’t afford gasoline for the car, which in any event we were sharing with my brother?

**Janet:** Now wait just a minute. Time out. You had to walk to school through snow for an hour every morning to get to class? You are starting to sound like my father. I think you’re the one with selective memory.

**Rex:** Well, I’m the only one who knows, because I’m the only one who did it. But if you want to verify my statistics, just get up some cold, snowy morning and walk from where we used to live over to Page School. You’ll see. Sixty minutes. Right on the button.

**Janet:** Well, maybe if you had to dig a tunnel through sixteen feet of snow, but since you brought it up, your “hour-long” walks to save gas were not the only consequence of our

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*Rex E. Lee was president of Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 12 January 1993.*

financial circumstances. Trying to keep both of us alive on \$10 a week was no small challenge.

**Rex:** Ten dollars?

**Janet:** Well, maybe \$10 plus a little change.

**Rex:** Whatever it was, it was no big deal.

Whenever things got really tough, I would just exercise my powers as student body president and schedule another banquet.

**Janet:** I thought you only did that on your dish night.

**Rex:** Whatever. Once we got beyond the joking stage, Janet's comments brought forth to me a rich outpouring of memories and reactions. In the first place, however selective her memory, she was basically right. Those were happy days. BYU was then and is now a wonderful place to live and learn. But my initial response was also correct. Most of us do tend to be selective in the memories that we manage to lodge in our permanent inventory. And on balance, selective memories are a good thing, because they make life more pleasant.

**Janet:** As I have thought more about that conversation, it has occurred to me that selectivity affects our lives in more ways than just what we remember. Today we would like to talk to you about another kind of selectivity, selective attitudes.

Positive attitudes not only determine our happiness but can also have a direct effect on many aspects of our lives, including our health. Five years ago when Rex was in the hospital suffering from cancer, I asked his doctor what role his positive attitude would play in his recovery. He was undergoing very serious chemotherapy and radiation and was receiving several antibiotics to counter infections that were rampant in his body. In answer to my question, the doctor replied, "Attitude is everything." I received a similar response from Dr. Russell M. Nelson when he performed a second open-heart surgery on my father. I wanted to know whether it was his skillful hands or my father's will that would pull him through. Humbly, the great doctor and future apostle

replied, "His will to live means more than anything I can do."

**Rex:** We now sustain Dr. Nelson as a prophet, seer, and revelator. He is one who understands the complete gospel plan, including our Heavenly Father's relationship to us—and therefore the role that selective attitude could be expected to play—as well as any other human being. By contrast, I have no idea whether Dr. Rosenberg had any belief in supernatural powers. Yet they both reached similar conclusions concerning the effects of attitude on something as important as life itself.

**Janet:** Each of us comes to this existence with a certain set of circumstances with which we deal. Some of you are smarter than the rest of us, some more healthy or witty or coordinated or artistic. Most of the differences are largely outside of our control. But we do control what we accomplish with what we have been given and, even more important, the attitude we have about the circumstances with which we came into life. At stake is nothing less significant than the difference between happiness and self-pity.

**Rex:** There is a person who does this very well. His name is Jason Hall. I'm constantly amazed at what he and his wife, Collette, are able to do, but even more amazing is the attitude with which they do it. I mean, the man seems to be everywhere, and doing everything. I make my own great variety of appearances at official BYU events, and there he is. Yet at the same time he is a husband, a student, and our student body president. And most relevant of all to today's discussion, he and Collette do it in a total personal environment in which they enjoy life—indeed, love life—and from everything I can tell, extract from life everything that our mortal years have to offer. And the point is, of course, that because of that selective attitude they are happier. They are also more productive, make better progress toward the eternal life that is the objective of all of us, and in the process help not just themselves but other people as well.

**Janet:** Jason's experience brings to mind a book I recently read entitled *You Gotta Keep Dancin'*. It's by Tim Hansel, who several years ago experienced a near-fatal climbing accident that has left him in constant pain. His book tells how he has learned to deal with this pain by distinguishing between happiness and joy. He says,

*There is nothing wrong with happiness, it's wonderful. . . . The only problem is that it is based on circumstances, and circumstances have a tendency to shift. Most people who live with chronic pain [or chronic problems] have a hard time being happy. That is to be expected. Although there are moments of laughter, nothing seems to stay.*

*Joy on the other hand is something which defies circumstances, and occurs in spite of difficult situations. Whereas happiness is a feeling, joy is an attitude.*

**Rex:** Let me tell you how these thoughts and Jason's example have helped me in a very specific way concerning a change that has come into my life over the past few months. So far, only a few people at BYU know about it, but for two reasons I have concluded that this is the time to share it with you. First, it ties so nicely to the point we are making about selective attitudes. And second, when you see me walking a little more deliberately than I used to, I don't want you to worry about it.

Starting sometime last spring, and gradually increasing since that time, I have developed what my doctors tell me is a peripheral neuropathy, which in English means a damage to some of my nerves. It does not affect my thinking or my ability to express myself, but only my legs and hands. No one is sure what caused it, but it will probably be permanent. You may have noticed—and if you haven't, you certainly will after today—that I walk more slowly and more carefully in order to maintain my equilibrium. There is also some discomfort associated with it, particularly pain

in my legs and my abdomen. For some reason, which no one can explain, the pain diminishes significantly when I stand.

**Janet:** We want to assure you of a couple of good news elements to this story. Extensive tests by highly competent doctors have revealed that there has been no corresponding spread of Rex's cancer, which appears to be as well under control now as it has been since first discovered. But despite this fact, sometimes we are frightened and we worry. And that is why, for both of us, selective attitude has been such a help.

**Rex:** It makes all the difference in the world how we look at what our world, in fact, consists of. For me these days, walking is a rather deliberate, conscious effort. It takes me longer to get from my office to the Wilkinson Center than it did a few months ago. Moreover, from time to time I am in some pain. But I am alive. My central nervous system, as well as the state of my cancer, has been unaffected, which means that I am able to remain as your president—a position that brings me great joy, and one in which I am surrounded by supportive and understanding colleagues (administrators, faculty, and staff), by you, my fellow students, and my family members.

**Janet:** Rex has told you what a difference people with whom he works and lives have made for him. The same is true for every one of you. The nature of the challenges, as well as their magnitude, will vary from person to person, but there is not a person anywhere for whom selective attitude would not affect the quality of life. And it is equally true that for every one of us the job is easier if there is someone who can help us.

**Rex:** Most of us have roommates, we all have bishops, home teachers, or other spiritual leaders, and we all have family and friends. It is important also to remember that the street runs both ways. While you are working on your own selectivity, remember that there are

opportunities to help others who are striving toward that same objective.

**Janet:** I was thinking about this just a few days ago. On snowy, icy days I jog with my daughters at a local indoor track. Over time I have observed the people there who routinely run, walk, limp, or even push their wheelchairs, and I have become strangely drawn to them. It has occurred to me how like the walk of life our struggle is around that track. People come with various abilities, expectations, and goals, and yet we all have one common ambition: We want to get around the track as best we can.

I like to think of this track as an analogy to life. Everything essential to a good society is present there except for one thing. We are all thinking of ourselves. We are not there to help others. Then, just as I rounded the next curve I saw them: two men walking together, slowly. One was hooked up to an oxygen tank while the other was pushing it for him. Halfway around the track each time they would stop at a resting place for the man on oxygen to regain his strength. My first impression was how wonderful it is that a man of such frail health would come to walk at the track. It takes a lot of courage and a lot of determination. Then, as I watched his companion, I realized more completely that the example of each man was equally compelling. Courage is admirable. Service is Christlike.

**Rex:** And the beauty is that there will be two beneficiaries of that kind of effort, two people whose attitudes will be more selective and more healthy in every sense of that word. Indeed, I don't mind sharing with you that preparing this particular talk at this time, and doing it conjointly with Janet, has been a very good thing for me personally, and specifically with respect to my own outlook and the selectivity with which I approach it. Jason Hall's physical circumstances are not likely to improve. Frankly, neither are mine. For each of us, those matters are beyond our control. But

very much within our control is how those circumstances affect us—or, better said, how we permit them to affect us. And, quite obviously, neither of us is unique in those respects. Every person within the sound of my voice, and many others who are not, are dealing with some challenge, some circumstance, some situation, large or small, not of his or her choosing that each fervently wishes would go away. Think of what your particular one is. I am sure that every one here today has at least one such circumstance. They range all the way from loneliness to not having enough money to get your car fixed to not being accepted into your chosen major to sitting home on Friday night when your roommates have dates. Admittedly, we may not be able to change the circumstance itself. What we can change is the way we choose to deal with it, spiritually, emotionally, and mentally.

**Janet:** As Rex said, we cannot control some of the circumstances that come into our lives and challenge us. What we can control is how we deal with them. President Kimball summarized this idea beautifully.

*One time or another, we all face adversity's chilling wind. One man flees from it, and like an unresisting kite, falls to the ground. Another yields, not retreating an inch, and the wind that would destroy him lifts him as readily to the heights. We are not measured by the trials we meet, only by those we overcome. It all depends [upon] . . . attitudes.*

**Rex:** Attitudes. Selective attitudes. Right now I'm struggling with two inner conflicting voices. Each of them speaks to me on a regular basis. My conflict is To which of these should I listen? The first says, on a daily basis:

*Isn't it a shame. You'll never run another marathon. To put it bluntly, you have become to the marathon what Bart Simpson is to the Benson Scholarship. You remember all those roughhouse games you used to play with your children, and how*

*many pleasant memories you and they associate with them? How much of that can you still do? And how about that week-long hike you took with your son Tom and other Boy Scouts into the Uintas, and you'd always planned to do the same thing again with the entire family. Forget it. And what about Lake Powell? It will never be the same again. Cliff jumping and waterskiing are out of the question. So are the long hikes that include climbing on steep sandstone hills. Things are really bad.*

The other voice, which speaks to me with equal regularity, says:

*Things are really good. You are alive. You have a job that you love. Even better, because your central nervous system is unaffected, you can still perform that job. There are still games you can play with your grandchildren, including many of the same ones you used to play with your children. And Lake Powell? There are lots of things you can do there: you can drive the boat, you can ride on the water weenie, you can laugh and joke and play with your children and grandchildren. And, come to think of it, it isn't all that bad to be the one who stands on the bow of the boat and yells out instructions as to where to put the anchors. What you now have is a legitimate excuse to pick the cushy jobs and leave the tough ones to someone else. Moreover, you can still attend BYU plays, concerts, and musicals. Just never mind those people who'll be saying "Who's that weird guy who continues to stand in the middle of the performances?"*

**Janet:** It's easy to have a good attitude when everything is going well. On the other hand, we might find ourselves wishing that our lives would always take the direction of our choosing so that we wouldn't have to work so hard on our attitudes. I admit that if I had one wish, it would be for a miracle: that Rex would be made whole again, that he could go on six-mile runs with me, hike on the rocks at Lake Powell, and play rough games of football with the children. I can't help wishing that our

back door would fly open and he would come rushing in like the wind and fly up the stairs and down the hall to retrieve a forgotten briefcase from his desk. I must admit that I haven't given up praying for that miracle. But as I do so, I realize that I do not understand all things and that an all-wise and all-knowing Heavenly Father does. If his plan is different from mine, then I pray that I will be given patience and an abundance of love that will carry me through whatever I must do. In the meantime, I am glad that Rex is here with me—glad that we can enjoy so much of life together. I must watch for the small miracles that I am given to sustain me and receive them with a grateful heart. Willa Cather said it in a slightly different, but very effective way: "Miracles rest . . . on our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always."

**Rex:** I told you a moment ago about the two inner voices that speak to me with some regularity. You know them. They speak to you, too. And yet we know how important our attitude is; we know to which of those voices we should listen. But despite the obviousness of both those issues, it is not always easy to do what we know we should in selecting the right attitude. Let us now suggest some things that have been helpful to us.

Most important is to enlist our Heavenly Father's help, both directly through prayer and also by living the kind of life that will put and keep us more in tune with the promptings of the Holy Ghost. Beyond that, we offer a few specifics:

First, selective attitude will work much better if we don't try to do it by ourselves. For most of life's really big problems there will be someone else who is willing and even anxious to shoulder part of the burden. Let them do so. It will be better for you and better for them. Indispensable for me has been the selectivity of Janet's attitude and the remarkable ways that she has generated optimism, enthusiasm,

and spiritual strength in me. She is the perfect manifestation of the Savior’s admonition to love other people as ourselves. And she is absolutely tireless. All the things that are now a little more difficult for me to do, she simply anticipates in advance and does them.

**Janet:** I could say the same thing about Rex. He came home from work late recently, looking tired. I could see pain in his eyes. But he still asked,

*What can I do to help? Have the girls finished their homework? I know you’ve had a hard day. Let me do the dishes after dinner. Let’s get everything done so we can watch the ten o’clock news together.*

Or sometimes he suggests going out to dinner or to some event of my choosing even when I know he’s too tired. His optimistic nature and sense of humor defy the fatigue and pain he feels. You talk about attitude—that is what keeps me going, and these are not isolated examples. They happen all the time. I guess it has to do with love—mature love. It is easier to maintain a positive attitude when we give and receive love. Love for our Heavenly Father, family, roommates, neighbors, and friends, love that is unselfish, love that is returned—all of these are the glue that holds a positive attitude together.

**Rex:** Another great and indispensable source of strength has come from my other family members and from my colleagues at the university. The most valuable help has come in small, subtle ways as I have picked up unmistakable signals that they genuinely care and want to help. Physically, there is little that they can do. But the obvious care that I see in their eyes and in their subtle comments and in their souls makes an enormous contribution to my own ability to select the right attitude.

**Janet:** Our second suggestion is to let go of past disappointments. Dwelling on them can perpetuate negative attitudes. So learn from

those experiences and then move on. Or, as Elder Packer has told us, “Leave it alone.”

**Rex:** Paul told the Philippians, “This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before” (Philippians 3:13).

**Janet:** Our third suggestion is, avoid blaming others for our circumstances. Above all, do not blame our Heavenly Father. Instead, ask whether there is something we can do that will make things better.

**Rex:** In the great majority of instances, attempts to affix blame will only make things worse. And yet it is a very common reaction. One of the most memorable letters that I received about five years ago when I developed my first cancer was from a dear friend, quite religious though not a member of our church, whom we had known quite well during our days in government. After telling me how distressed she was at the news of my illness, and particularly at the fact that such a thing would happen to me, she said, “Here I find myself with my knees on the floor and my fist in the air.” As an expressive metaphor, it was very good, but what it expressed was a counterproductive attitude. In short, knees on the floor, yes. Fist in the air, no.

**Janet:** Our next suggestion relates to how we deal vicariously with other people’s successes. How do we react when good things happen to other people—a roommate gets engaged, a friend receives the only A in the class, or a neighbor comes home with a new car. Can we be happy for someone who performs well, has many talents, or gets all the breaks? During the time that each of us is going through our own challenges, inevitably there will be others around us who seem to be without burdens and who are experiencing significant successes. Our ability to maintain a selective attitude in getting through the period of our own difficulty will depend substantially on how we react to the simultaneous successes and abilities of those around us.

**Rex:** Let me give you a couple of personal perspectives. For about the past sixteen years, running has provided not only my principal source of exercise and relaxation, but a major social outlet as well. Some of the most memorable exchanges of ideas and aspirations that Janet and I have shared over that time have come while we have jogged. It has also become a major family event that has included our sons and daughters. And beyond our family, over the years some of my closest friendships outside my family have been with running companions. Those were wonderful experiences. They carry memories that will never fade, including thirteen marathons, one of them under three hours—not terribly impressive to our track coaches, but a pretty decent accomplishment for a guy whose principal athletic feat during high school was a basketball season scoring record that still stands. It’s an all-time record for that high school: 0-for-January.

So it was at first quite difficult for me to see Janet and some of my daughters going jogging without me, and also not to be able to join the group of friends with whom I have run for many years. What I am working on right now is an attitude of joy, rather than sorrow, that they can do some of the things that I can’t. For you also, your happiness will depend in substantial part on your ability to find joy rather than competitive disappointment in the accomplishments of those around you.

**Janet:** Christ is our example in all things. To borrow Elder Maxwell’s phrase, we must make Christ our “attitudinal Exemplar” (*Even As I Am* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1982], p. 99).

In Gethsemane, as well as on the cross, the message Christ left with the world was one of selective attitude. As important as it is for us to understand the meaning of the Atonement, it is also imperative that we comprehend the example of Christ’s attitude as he faced his crucifixion. The scriptures tell us that just prior to the

great intercessory prayer in Gethsemane, Jesus told Peter, James, and John to be of good cheer.

**Rex:** Try to put yourself in the Savior’s place as he anticipated what he was facing: Gethsemane, Judas’ betrayal, Peter’s denial, the trial, which was little more than a farce, and the terrible ordeal of the Crucifixion. His attitude was not only one of instruction to his disciples, but he also taught us an unforgettable lesson when he uttered, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

**Janet:** We will never have to suffer any agony equal to that endured by Christ. As Elder Maxwell so insightfully adds:

*Though our trials are tiny compared to [the Savior’s], . . . Jesus was of good cheer because then current conditions did not alter His sources of ultimate joy. Are not our fundamental sources of joy the same as His? . . .*

*It remains for us, therefore, to be of good cheer even when . . . current circumstances seem hopeless. . . . The unfolding of God’s purposes may require the collapse of other things.*

*How often is it necessary for dismantling to occur in order for something better to be put in place? [Even As I Am, pp. 100, 101]*

**Rex:** Just as we seek out people who have successfully met challenges similar to ours and find comfort in following their example, we need to seek and follow Christ as our example in all things. When our challenges seem overwhelming, when our choices seem to be taken away, when we don’t know where to turn, the one thing we have left to do is to follow Christ’s example of selective attitude. As he told us, “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of *good cheer*; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33; emphasis added).

**Janet:** So many times at night after long talks with a child who has had a discouraging day, I find myself saying, “Cheer up. Trust me, everything will be all right.” Because I have

seen more of life than my child, I believe things will work out. How infinitely more our Heavenly Father knows about us, our tomorrows, and our potential, and how eager he is for us to be of good cheer.

**Rex:** Many of you may have experienced challenges greater than ours. I'm sure some of you have and could undoubtedly teach us some things. Some of you may right now be in the midst of dealing with trials that seem unfair. And others of you might be just around the corner or light years away from some of your life's greatest challenges.

**Janet:** The common denominator we share is that at one time or another we will all face challenges. Our attitude in dealing with everyday obstacles prepares us for greater challenges that may lie ahead. Now I don't want to sound like the big fourth grader talking to the first grader saying, "If you think it is hard where you are, you just wait until you get where I am!" In the first place, we are all here in this life together. We all have adversity, and it's no respecter of age. The point I want to make is that life is good despite the challenges. Or perhaps I should say life gets better and better *because* of meeting life's challenges head-on.

**Rex:** As our ability to meet challenges grows, so also, proportionately, does our love of life. Janet and I have no greater example of this than our four parents. They are all in their early eighties and at this point have faced most of life's obstacles. And yet they greet each day with enthusiasm, with a love of life, and with a love for the Lord.

**Janet:** I know that our Heavenly Father loves us. I also know that when it seems that we have been left with limited choices, we still have one choice left—one of attitude. And when we are groping for that positive attitude, if we can hang on to faith and prayer, our love

for the life our Heavenly Father has given us will know no bounds. When we feel love, our hearts are softened and we become aware of all of the small miracles around us. We then know that even when life is not perfect, it can be perfectly wonderful.

**Rex:** As the Lord has told us in section 68 of the Doctrine and Covenants,

*Behold, this is the promise of the Lord unto you, O ye my servants.*

*Wherefore, be of good cheer, and do not fear, for I the Lord am with you, and will stand by you; and ye shall bear record of me, even Jesus Christ, that I am the Son of the living God, that I was, that I am, and that I am to come. [D&C 68:5–6]*

**Janet:** I have a testimony that God lives, that he hears and answers our prayers, that he sent his Son to atone for our sins, that he revealed his everlasting gospel to us in these latter days that we might find our way home to him, our God, who loves us more than we can comprehend.

**Rex:** I share that testimony. This is not just another church. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is literally the restored kingdom of Jesus Christ and therefore has brought again to the earth the authority to administer the saving ordinances. Those ordinances can be even more beneficial if we couple them with a positive, selective attitude. Selective memories, such as the ones that occurred to Janet and me last spring, make life more pleasant. Selective attitudes—particularly when combined with the truths of the restored gospel—affect the quality of life itself. That we may effectively combine our knowledge of the Restoration with a positive view of life and what it has to offer is our prayer, which we offer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.