

# *Learning Eternal Truths Through Our Relationships with Others*

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Good morning to all of you in attendance today. I am most honored to be here, but I must admit that picking the topic for today and preparing this talk have not been easy tasks. My concerns and prayers have been that I will be able to talk about things that will strengthen testimonies, both yours and mine.

During spring term I was with a group of Study Abroad nursing students in Australia. I asked them what kinds of devotional speeches were most memorable to them. They said, “Talks with stories.” They know I tell a lot of stories as I teach and may have given that answer to make it easy for me. Nonetheless I decided to act on their advice and tell stories. In fact, some of my stories are going to be about nursing students.

Much of my time here at BYU is spent teaching students how to build therapeutic relationships. Over the years I have come to realize that there isn’t much to do with the gospel that isn’t about relationships—either our relationships with Heavenly Father and the Savior or with our fellowmen. So today I want to talk about learning eternal truths through our relationships with others.

Some years ago I was called to teach the four-year-olds in Primary. After a few months of teaching, I began to be somewhat frustrated.

The bottom line of every lesson, regardless of the title, was “You are Heavenly Father’s child, and He loves you.” I thought, “I have given the same lesson a hundred different ways. Surely there is something more these four-year-olds should know.” However, as I have grown older and wiser, I have come to realize that the message being taught was the most important lesson they could learn. We don’t emphasize that message in Primary only, but in every organization of the Church and in documents available to the entire world. President Henry B. Eyring beautifully explained how our relationship with our Father in Heaven provides the sure foundation for relationships with others in the introduction to his book *Because He First Loved Us*. President Eyring said:

*The first and great commandment is this: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy might, mind, and strength; and in the name of Jesus Christ thou shalt serve him” (D&C 59:5). The restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ through the Prophet Joseph Smith brought many blessings.*

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*For me, none is more precious than a knowledge of the loving nature of our Heavenly Father and of His Son, Jesus Christ. When the Holy Ghost confirms that knowledge to us, our hearts are prepared to keep that first and great commandment.*

*Keeping the first commandment always leads to keeping the second, because to love the Father and the Son is to serve those They love. In answer to our prayers for guidance, They send the Holy Ghost to tell us how to help others and to feel at least a part of God's love. So in that service, our love of God increases and the keeping of the second great commandment leads us back to the first, in an ascending circle. In time, our very natures change. We are filled with the love of God, which, even in a world with so much misery and despair, brings us happiness and hope. [Henry B. Eyring, *Because He First Loved Us* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), ix]*

Most of my growing-up years were spent on a ranch in a remote area of Idaho. The two most important dances of the year in our high school were the Christmas formal and the junior prom. When I was a freshman I was asked to the Christmas formal by a very nice boy named Jerry. Even though Jerry was nice, I didn't consider him to be one of the "cool" guys at our school and wasn't sure I wanted to go with him. Luckily it was Friday afternoon as I was hurrying to catch the bus home from school when he stopped me to ask me to the dance. I quickly explained that I had to ask permission from my Dad and would let him know later.

Most of us lived on ranches some distance from town and didn't have telephones, so I had until Monday to give my answer. At that time the Church had not established guidelines regarding the appropriate age for dating. I was about a month away from turning 15. I had been on a couple of dates and had gotten permission for those dates from my mother, but my mother had died in an accident on our ranch some months earlier. A lot of thoughts were going through my head as I rode home

on the bus that afternoon. I suspected my dad thought I was too young to date. There were few Latter-day Saints living in our area, and Jerry wasn't one of them. Even though we had never discussed it, I knew Dad would prefer I date members. So I came to the conclusion that, all things considered, Dad would say I couldn't go to the dance with Jerry and I wouldn't have to worry about it anymore.

However, things didn't go as I expected. I explained the situation to Dad, ending with "and so I told him I needed to ask you, and it is okay if you say I can't go."

After a pause, Dad replied, "Jeannie, I know the boy's father, and he seems like a good man, but I don't know the boy. I won't know most of the boys who will be asking you out. You know the boys in your school and what they are like. You know the kind of person you should be dating. So you are going to have to make those decisions."

I learned a lot from that short exchange. First, my father trusted me. He trusted that I knew the difference between good and bad behavior and would make wise choices about dating. Second, in a flash of understanding, which hit me like a ton of bricks, I realized I couldn't place the responsibility for my decisions or the consequences of those decisions on anyone else.

Some might consider my father an unwise parent for placing that responsibility on a not-quite 15-year-old. However, my father knew me well. He had spent a good part of each day of my short life with me. He knew how I reacted when, after repeated scolding, he finally spanked me to get me to stop chasing the chickens. He knew I had a mind of my own and that more often than not I preferred to make my own decisions. He also knew I had a testimony of the gospel and wanted to do what was right. Being given the responsibility for dating decisions caused me to focus on the decision I had to make rather than on my need for independence or any rebelliousness I may

have felt in reaction to restrictions Dad could have established. I am certain my father felt the burden of being a single parent and had sought the Lord's help through prayer long before our interaction about dating. He also had a clear understanding of the principle of agency. In that brief interchange he removed a source of potential conflict from our relationship and indirectly said to me, "You have your agency; use it wisely." Did I go to the dance? Yes. Did I always make wise decisions about dating? No.

Just as my father's knowing me made it possible for him to respond in a helpful way, so it is for us as we seek to be helpful to one another. One of the first things students discover when they come to work in a psychiatric setting is that their skills are limited when it comes to communicating in an honest, open, yet nurturing manner. It is not unusual for their limitation to become apparent when a patient of the opposite sex asks for their address or phone number so he or she can contact them for a date after being discharged. Feeling uncomfortable and distressed, students often respond by giving an easy and not totally honest answer, such as "I am married" or "I am engaged" or "I am dating someone." Then they quickly find a reason to leave. When I suggest that their response implied that they would be willing to give the patient their number if they were not otherwise attached, the problems with the response are apparent. Searching for a better response, we usually come up with something like "Your question makes me uncomfortable because I am here to learn how to be a good nurse. Having a personal relationship with a patient would get in the way of my doing that. It sounds like you are wishing you had somebody to spend time with when you get out of the hospital. Can we talk about that?"

The new response openly expresses the student's feelings and establishes the boundaries of the relationship without rejecting the patient. In order to model that response dur-

ing future interactions, students must learn to recognize and manage their own feelings so they can listen closely enough to identify the patient's underlying concern. We can't understand others in ways that are meaningful enough to lead to helpful and positive relationships, be they personal or professional, unless we are willing to give our full attention as we interact.

In today's world we have technology that allows us to save time and multitask to the max. As you all know, IT stands for information technology. IT equipment is made to communicate information. It does not communicate feelings or nonverbal messages, nor is it a conveyance for spiritual impressions. Although technology allows us to communicate important information that may be spiritual in nature, it does not convey the information essential to the establishment of spiritually significant interpersonal relationships. Often the quickest way isn't the best way. Although the Holy Ghost can and will assist us in coming to truly understand others, the Lord makes it clear over and over again in the scriptures that faith must be yoked with works. Meaningful relationships are built on a lot of work, which includes a willingness to put our self-interest aside and give of our time and attention in order to truly know another.

Rachel Cornish, a former BYU nursing student, wrote this regarding her newfound understanding of relationships:

*Some experiences in life are priceless because their lessons must be lived to be understood. . . . The time spent in Guatemala and the impact will be forever inscribed upon my changed perspective. Knowing about people cannot compare to knowing the people; nor can viewing photographs of places be compared to being there. The difference is in the depth of understanding.*

Sometimes it isn't those we know well, such as parents or Church leaders, but the

more humble followers of Christ who teach us eternal principles. Two days each week I supervise student nurses during their clinical experiences at the Utah State Hospital. One afternoon I was feeling tired and draggy and went to get a handful of Hot Tamales from a little quarter vending machine. At a nearby pop machine was a patient in his mid-30s who had been at the hospital since developing schizophrenia many years before. I'll call him Joe. Even though we had passed each other many times in the halls and on the grounds, I did not know Joe well. In a tiny manila envelope he carried a few quarters, part of the meager pay he earned for helping with yard work at the hospital.

As I approached the vending machine I noticed it was almost empty, but I decided there were enough candies to get a handful. I placed my quarter in the slot and turned the crank. No candy came out.

Talking to no one in particular, I said, "Dang, that machine stole my quarter!"

Joe immediately stepped to the machine, saying, "Here, let me help you," and dropped one of his quarters into the machine.

Protesting, I put my hand out to keep him from turning the crank and said, "No, don't put your quarter in there. The machine doesn't work, and I don't need candy anyway."

But Joe was quicker than I was. He turned the crank, and out came the candy. I thanked him and tried to repay him, but he refused the quarter and said, "I could see you were really hungry and hallucinating too."

Some years ago I attended a conference at which an anthropologist told of his experiences living and doing research among the bush people of Africa. I don't remember his name, but I have often thought of his closing remarks. He explained that when a tribesman has a successful hunt, he brings the kill back to the village, takes what is needed for his family, and leaves the rest to be shared by the other members of the village. The speaker ended his

discussion of hunting practices with a remark that was almost an afterthought. He said, "I have noticed that the people who have the least are the most willing to share." Joe, sharing one of his few quarters with me, reminded me of the anthropologist's remark. I wondered, "Am I more like Joe and the bushmen of Africa, willing to share when I see another's need? Or am I like the rich man who asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life, then went away grieved because he had many possessions and was unwilling to sell what he had, give to the poor, and follow Christ?" (See Mark 10:17–22.)

Over the years I have been inspired and at times moved to tears as I have read or heard students' accounts of eternal truths they have learned as they have come to know and love some of the more humble people of world. The first two quotes are from students who worked with the indigenous people in hospitals and health clinics in the highlands of Guatemala. Emily Isrealson recounts:

*When we finished gathering information for our family assessment, we asked the single mother of this humble family of eight—who lived in a mud-floored, stick home with no electricity or running water—what she would say her family needed most. She replied, "I can't think of anything we need. We are greatly blessed. My oldest daughter has a job that gives us enough money to buy our food and allows me to be at home to care for the younger children and teach them about God. There is nothing that we need." I was dumbfounded. From my perspective she had nothing, and then I realized she was right: she had everything that was important.*

Amy Cutler said this after participating in a service project:

*I have not served them; they have truly served me. . . . As I watched them accept the items, I quickly realized that the humility I saw in them was more service to me than anything I had just given them. Their sweet mannerisms and gentle humility*

*spoke volumes to me about Christ. . . . Although I felt like I would complete a wondrous service project for these sweet Guatemalan people, they have indeed completed a life-changing experience for me. Without knowing it, they have served me with their smiles and greetings and their touch and their patient humility. . . . I now understand better the importance of the priorities in life: faith, a love of God, a hope in Christ, and a love for families.*

Some nursing students helped an Ecuadorean family erect their prefab cane house. Students in Ecuador work with a philanthropic organization named Hogar de Cristo that helps impoverished families secure land and the materials for a home through a financial arrangement similar to a mortgage. Even though the students spend their week working in hospitals located in the city and health clinics scattered throughout the large development where these cane homes will be located, they choose to spend their Saturday helping erect a home rather than going sightseeing. They make that choice in part because so many prior students have considered the experience of building the home their most meaningful Ecuadorean experience. Students say it is most meaningful because they get to know and love the family as they are working alongside them. I believe it also has something to do with sacrifice. Building a house is not part of their course requirements—working in the hospitals and clinics is. Just as our pioneer ancestors grew in their love for one another as they worked together to build homes, temples, and cities, we too are blessed with an increase of love as we work together for a good purpose.

One of the nursing students who went to Australia for Study Abroad wrote in her final paper about an uncomfortable experience she had that helped her to gain a more Christlike perspective. She prefaced her story by saying she had been distressed by a relative's rather crude and derogatory remark about the work she would be doing for the rest of her life

because she had chosen to be a nurse. With her permission and in her own words, Jenn Jackson said:

*One of the most beautiful moments I had on this trip was watching Amanda—one of the nurses at Best of Care—talk to, touch, and treat a patient. The patient was one who many of the caregivers refused to take on their caseloads because his house was filthy, he owned seven or eight cats, and he was completely unhygienic. There was a horrible odor exuding from who knows where. Not only that, sometimes he was known as being grouchy and critical. With all that being known to Amanda, she took us to his home and introduced us to him. She treated him with the utmost respect, talked to him about his life and his family, sat on his cat-fur-lined sofa, and touched his hand. She then began teaching us about some of the problems he had, and at one point she took off his socks with her bare hands. His legs were disgusting and lined with dead skin. He had gout in his toes and fungus on his nails. I couldn't believe it when she held his foot and touched him without being repulsed. . . .*

*After telling us some things about his feet and legs, she gently put his dirty sock back on, patted his shoulder, wished him a good day, and took us home. As I thought about that experience, I thought about the Savior and how He touched the lepers on their rotten skin, washed the dirty feet of the twelve apostles, and went places that were not always the nicest places in town. The Savior went to people's homes regardless of how rich or poor they were. He touched them, without gloves, regardless of how disgusting they were. He cleansed them regardless of how dirty they were.*

*Now when I think about the statement made by my relative, I don't get frustrated. It is still a completely simplified statement of what I will be doing with the rest of my life, but I realize now that it may not be all that inaccurate. I will be serving my brothers and sisters, Heavenly Father's children, and will be doing for them what they cannot do for themselves, just like the Savior. If the King of Kings and Lord of Lords can humble Himself enough to*

*touch and cleanse the lowest of the low, then I can do it too. I can be a tool in His hands by touching, cleansing, and healing, and there is no disgrace in being a tool in the hand of the greatest Healer of all.*

What is nurtured in us and what do we nurture in others when the foundation of our

relationships is the knowledge that we are all Heavenly Father's children and He loves us? I pray that each of us will grow in our understanding of eternal truths through loving and serving one another until our very natures are changed and one day we discover His image reflected in our countenances. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.