

The Spokes of a Balanced Life

GARY K. PALMER

I grew up in the small community of South Ogden, Utah. As boys, my older brother and I lived on our bicycles. We rode our bikes everywhere. With the aid of clothespins, we would attach cards on the bicycle frame next to the spokes so that the snapping sound of the cards would imitate the rumbling sound of a motorcycle engine. At least that was our intention. The more cards the better. They wouldn't last long, and soon we would have to replace them with newer cards.

Other than creating an annoying sound for our neighbors, there was one problem this practice seemed to cause. Some of the spokes began to loosen. Of course my older brother, being 18 months smarter than I, thought he knew exactly what to do: tighten them up. With the help of a special tool we eagerly tightened all the spokes—even the spokes that didn't need tightening. We gave them all an extra tug or two just to be sure they wouldn't loosen again.

Soon we began our first test run of our newly tightened rims and wheels. To our surprise the tires were wobbly and crooked. What we didn't know was that all the spokes needed to be perfectly balanced in tightness to keep the rim and tire straight so they wouldn't rub against the bicycle frame.

Could it be that sometimes our lives are similar to this? Do we have a few loose spokes? Let's review some of our spokes today and see how we are doing in creating a smooth and balanced ride through life.

Spoke Number One: Include Laughter Each Day

I have learned that the ability to find the humor in life, to laugh at everyday family calamities, helps keep life in perspective. If we will learn to laugh and play more with our family and friends, not only will we feel better but so will they.

As Brigham Young put it:

I will take the liberty of suggesting to my brethren who address the congregation that our sermons should be short, and if they are not filled with life and spirit let them be shorter. [JD 12:27]

Sister Hinckley would say concerning her counsel of laughing your way through life: "You either have to laugh or cry. I prefer to

Gary K. Palmer was a teaching professor in the BYU Department of Recreation Management and Youth Leadership when this devotional address was given on 29 May 2007.

laugh. Crying gives me a headache” (quoted in Virginia H. Pearce, ed., *Glimpses into the Life and Heart of Marjorie Pay Hinckley* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999], 107; see also “At Home with the Hinckleys,” *Ensign*, October 2003, 24).

Humor, used with sensitivity, can unite spouses. While I was serving as bishop of a singles ward, an engaged couple asked me if they could have their wedding reception at our house.

I quickly replied, “Of course you can.”

I forgot to tell my wife. When she received their wedding invitation a few days before the big event, she happened to notice the address of the reception. When I got home from work she asked me if I had forgotten to tell her something important.

After considerable thought I said, “No, not that I can think of.”

“Are we having a wedding reception at our house?” she asked.

From the expression on her face, I could tell I was in trouble.

“Ooooooh, you mean *that* reception,” I replied.

This is when you hope your wife has a good sense of humor. I quickly helped her prepare our home for the wedding reception—under her able direction, of course.

Most family calamities, given enough time, provide humor and laughter—like the time I took our misbehaving two-year-old son, Tyler, home from sacrament meeting. (We live right next door to the church.) After turning on cartoons for my son, I fell asleep and didn’t wake up when my five-year-old showed up to take Tyler back to Primary.

Sacrament meeting was not quite over, and the bishop was pouring out his soul to the congregation when the two children returned. The trouble was, Tyler had stripped down to moon boots and training pants and picked up his popgun rifle on the way out the door. It became whisper quiet when Tyler marched up the aisle with his rifle, took aim,

and shot the bishop. It sure woke up the congregation.

Of course it wasn’t funny then. Time helps humor emerge gradually. The trick is finding the humor in the event now.

So perhaps a laugh a day does keep the doctor away. As the scriptures say: “A merry heart doeth good like a medicine” (Proverbs 17:22).

Does this mean we go around laughing all the time? Of course not. But we certainly could laugh a lot more than we do.

Spoke Number Two: Pray

“Be thou humble; and the Lord thy God shall lead thee by the hand, and give thee answer to thy prayers” (D&C 112:10).

When I turned 12 years old, I went on my first overnight campout with the Scouts. With eager hands I packed my hand-me-down camping gear and headed to the mountains with the troop. I ended up sleeping in a large tent with several other boys, including my older brother. Being the newest and youngest Scout, I felt somewhat intimidated by it all. It was nice to have my older brother with me. He was big and strong and older than most of the other Scouts.

As we all prepared for bed, I quietly climbed out of my sleeping bag and knelt down to say my nightly prayer. As I was praying, I could hear some of the other boys laughing at what I was doing. I was embarrassed and stopped.

My older brother came to my rescue. Responding to the teasing boys, he said in a loud voice, “If my little brother wants to pray, he’s going to pray. Anybody object?”

Not a word was said, and I went back to my prayer. I have often thought of this experience, and I’m thankful for my brother who taught me not to be ashamed to pray regardless of where we are.

President Faust has said:

Each of us has problems that we cannot solve and weaknesses that we cannot conquer without

reaching out through prayer to a higher source of strength. That source is the God of heaven to whom we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. [James E. Faust, "The Lifeline of Prayer," *Ensign*, May 2002, 59]

Prayer is our direct communication with our Heavenly Father. We do need to be on the right frequency, however, and be precisely tuned in to communicate. It reminds me of a time when I was trying to listen to a BYU basketball game on KSL while driving home from Idaho. The ball game would fade in and out as I meandered through the mountains on my journey home. And so it is with prayer: One cannot be tuned into the right frequency while engaged in inappropriate behavior. We may from time to time need to adjust our spiritual frequency dial to hear our Heavenly Father with perfect clarity.

While I was serving as a missionary in Western Canada, our mission president asked one of the elders to bless the food we were about to partake of. The elder blessed the food and everything else he could think of. After the lengthy prayer ended, the mission president tactfully counseled us about public prayers. He said that when we are asked to pray, we should keep the prayer focused on the purpose of the prayer. If you are asked to bless the food, then bless the food and that's it.

Francis M. Lyman, president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, was quoted by Bruce R. McConkie in *Mormon Doctrine* concerning meeting prayers:

It is not necessary to offer very long and tedious prayers, either at opening or closing. It is not only not pleasing to the Lord for us to use excess of words, but also it is not pleasing to the Latter-day Saints. Two minutes will open any kind of meeting, and a half minute will close it. [In MD, 583, "prayer"; emphasis in original]

Spoke Number Three: Make the Best of Each Day, Good or Bad

As I was growing up, my family would occasionally go to an amusement park located a few miles from Ogden. In those days you would purchase a special pass containing a certain number of tickets for different rides in the park. One of the tickets was for entrance into what they called the fun house. We always saved the fun house for last because once we got in we could stay there for as long as we wanted.

Inside this attraction were two very large moving barrels. They were connected together, each one turning in the opposite direction. The idea was to see if you could keep your balance and walk upright through these two barrels without falling down. When I tried to walk through the barrels, I immediately fell down. I tried to stand up but fell down again. Being somewhat determined, I tried a third time, only to fall again. Most of the other people had mastered the challenge and either stepped on me or maneuvered around me and continued through the barrels.

At this point, somewhat embarrassed and slightly in pain, I decided to quit and just sit down and stay at the bottom. Well, the barrels didn't care what I decided to do; they just kept turning. I found myself being tossed and tumbled like I was inside a giant clothes dryer. It didn't take long to realize that giving up was much worse than trying.

I gathered myself together as best I could and, with some struggle, began to crawl on my hands and knees just to stop from tumbling and to keep my balance. Soon I was able to go from crawling to standing up in short spurts. Finally I could stand up and walk in perfect rhythm with the turning barrel.

I began to slowly make my way through the first barrel but soon encountered the second barrel going the opposite direction. This required me to quickly switch directions while maintaining my balance. After several miscues I finally made it through the barrels.

I tell this story because it reminds me of how life is sometimes. Have you ever felt your life moving in opposite directions? Tumbling, falling, standing up, falling again, and wanting to give up? But be advised: You don't want to give up. You never want to give up.

As Paul put it:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . .

Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. [Romans 8:35, 37]

We know that we don't have control over all the situations that come into our lives each day. But, then again, it's not so much what comes into our lives as it is how we respond to it. For example, when I think of the story of Joseph who was sold into Egypt, it is easy to see that Joseph made the best of each situation he encountered. I believe he was a good son. He was obedient and respectful to his parents, but, sadly, his brothers were jealous of him and eventually sold him as a slave. It's kind of hard to imagine that brothers would do that. Of course we know the story doesn't end there, does it? He was the best slave; he was the best prisoner; he was the best servant; he was the best steward over Potiphar's household. Eventually he became the best ruler in Egypt. And in the end he forgave his brothers and saved his family. He made the best out of each situation that came his way, good or bad.

The Apostle Paul said: "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God. . . . If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:28, 31).

Described by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, President Hinckley's philosophy is: "Things will work out. Keep trying. Be believing. Be happy. Don't get discouraged. Things will work out" (Jeffrey R. Holland, "President

Gordon B. Hinckley: Stalwart and Brave He Stands," *Ensign*, June 1995, 12).

Spoke Number Four: Serve Others

Spencer W. Kimball said: "When we are engaged in the service of our fellowmen, not only do our deeds assist them, but we put our own problems in a fresher perspective" ("Small Acts of Service," *Ensign*, December 1974, 2).

How do we serve? One of the best ways to serve is in our local ward. We should be active in our ward. I don't mean a little active. I mean very active, very involved. This is the one area in which we can probably serve the most. We don't necessarily have to have a formal calling. There are many ways to serve without a calling. The Lord has said: "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" (D&C 58:26).

When sign-up sheets are passed around in priesthood or Relief Society, do we sign up? Or do we only sign up when it fits our schedule? Is that really how to serve? Are we good home teachers, good visiting teachers? Could it be that we are some of the people who passed by the wounded man on the road to Jericho in the parable of the good Samaritan? I hope not. I hope we are the good Samaritan.

As the Savior told the lawyer:

Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?

And he said, He that shewed mercy on him.

Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise. [Luke 10:36–37]

While serving as bishop of a BYU singles ward, I knew one young man in the ward who supported everything we sponsored. He came to every family home evening, every activity, every dance, every service project. Anything the ward sponsored, he was there. The reason I bring this up is because he didn't actually need the activities for himself. He had a serious

girlfriend in another ward and was soon to be engaged, but still he came. I asked him why he came to all the ward social functions. He humbly replied, "I feel like if I attend, perhaps I can contribute to the success of the event. Maybe I can help someone feel welcome, maybe I can add to the fun. I just think it's another great opportunity to serve." In other words, he didn't attend to see what was in it for him but rather what he could contribute to others.

When my older brother and I were growing up, my dad always dragged us to the welfare farm. I say "drag" because we didn't want to go, but dad always took us anyway. I remember that usually the work was hard and unpleasant, like pulling weeds in the hot sun. I recall my father telling us once that all those people working out there were serving people they didn't even know. He said, "Take a good look and see who is here. These members are the stalwarts of our ward. They don't have to be here. There is no glory, no fanfare, no recognition here—just quiet, behind-the-scenes service."

As a newly married student at BYU I was called to serve in a BYU ward bishopric. I tried to serve the bishop as best I could, but my wife and I loved to travel to visit with our families on the weekends as much as possible. This meant getting excused from my church responsibilities.

After a few months serving this way, I noticed that while the bishop did politely excuse me, he was disappointed that I would be away again. I asked him if it was all right that we visit our families so often. His reply surprised me: "I would like to visit my family as well, but my calling is to serve here."

I got the message. I was serving when it didn't interfere with my plans—when it was convenient. I learned from this good bishop what it really meant to actually serve the Lord. I thought I knew how to serve before this experience, but I was wrong. Visiting my family was certainly important, but I learned I could

do both. With some planning I found time to visit my family after I had completed my calling. There will always be some things you have to give up to do justice to a calling, whether it's in the bishopric or as a home teacher. I've decided that we probably have enough time to do all that the Lord expects us to do—including visiting our families—but we probably don't have enough time to do all the things we would like to do.

As King Benjamin said: "And behold, I tell you these things that ye may learn wisdom; that ye may learn that when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God" (Mosiah 2:17).

Spoke Number Five: Don't Be Distracted by Worldly Things

It is easy to get caught up in worldly things. The world is always selling something so enticing, so inviting. We are always wanting things and then more things. Everywhere we are told, "Go ahead; you deserve it." Not that wanting things is all bad, but it can be if this becomes the dominant force of your life. The Apostle Paul counseled: "While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18).

My parents always told me that the best things in life are free. Now I think I know what they meant: family, friends, grandchildren, church, smiles, sunsets, mountains, trees, birds, flowers, and even my dog. Of course, some of these aren't actually free, but they are eternal.

The Savior said:

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. [Matthew 6:24]

Some people think you can have one foot in the world and one foot in the Church. Is this

really possible? And why would you want to anyway? I believe the reason why the Lord told Adam to stop what he was doing on the seventh day and worship Him was to have a reminder of why we are here in the first place. It's a weekly course correction to see if we are on track. I'm sure after Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden of Eden that life was filled with hard work just to survive. But, even so, Adam stopped, paused, and worshipped God on the seventh day—pretty good advice for all of us.

Nephi told us that in our day good would be called evil and evil would be called good (see 2 Nephi 15:20). Does that sound like the world to you? Have you ever noticed how often religion and spirituality are portrayed as confining, narrow-minded, and weak?

Be careful about what you accumulate in this life. Paul warned: "For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out" (1 Timothy 6:7).

We need to remember that all we take with us is who we have become through serving God.

Spoke Number Six: Be an Example

Years ago a friend of mine told me an incredible story about his father's first exposure to the Church. His father was in the navy during World War II. While serving on a battleship he became acquainted with two Mormon boys from Idaho. They were nice boys and everyone seemed to like them, but they were different. When the ship would come into port, many of the sailors would go into town to party and drink—but not these two. They seemed to find their own fun and avoid the crowd. When the war ended my friend's father married, settled in Southern California, and became the father of two young children. One Sunday morning while working on his roof, his wife shouted up to him, saying something like this:

"Don't you think it's about time that we started taking our children to church?"

"Good idea," he replied.

"Yes, but what church?" she asked.

"Take them to the Mormon Church," he said. "Two of the nicest sailors I ever met were Mormons."

"But where is the Mormon Church?" she asked.

"Look it up in the phone book," he answered.

And so she did. To her surprise she found a Mormon church building not far from their home. She dressed her two small children in their nicest clothes and took them to the LDS Church. They were welcomed with open arms. The ward members took the children directly to junior Sunday School. The children had a great time and asked to go back week after week. Soon the parents were attending also. They were all baptized into the Church.

The story doesn't end there. The parents were so excited about this new church they had found for their family that they told some of their best neighbor friends about it. Soon other families in the neighborhood were going to the same Mormon ward. From this small beginning, three generations later, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people in the Church today. Why? Because two Mormon boys from Idaho lived their religion.

One of the amazing parts of this story is that these two boys from Idaho had no idea of the impact they had on one person in the navy. Imagine their joy in the next life when they meet all these Latter-day Saints. "By small and simple things are great things brought to pass" (Alma 37:6).

Sometimes when a missionary returns home we hear questions like: Have you made the adjustment to normal life? Have you returned to the earth yet?

Why in the world would we suggest that? Shouldn't *we* be trying to be more like *them*? Wouldn't it be better if all of us acted like recently returned missionaries? Isn't that what a Latter-day Saint should be?

As President McKay said many times: “Whate’er thou art, act well thy part” (*Cherished Experiences from the Writings of President David O. McKay*, comp. Clare Middlemiss [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1955], 174).

Spoke Number Seven: Build Your Foundation on Christ

As a teenager I worked for my brother-in-law doing house construction. It was always interesting to watch the excavation crew with their big bulldozer come out and dig a huge hole for the house. After the bulldozer was finished, we would all climb down into the large hole and begin digging the footings upon which the foundation would rest. It was hard to imagine that this hole would soon become a beautiful new home. But this is where it all begins. Without the foundation, there is no home—at least not a home that would make

it through the changing seasons of our climate. This is what makes the home strong, firm, and almost immovable.

This must have been what Helaman meant when he counseled his sons:

Remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you. [Helaman 5:12]

So, yes, it’s probably a good idea to check your spokes of life periodically, just as we as boys checked the spokes on our bicycles. Be careful though; keep them not only tight but also balanced for a smoother ride through life.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

