

Adoption: A Gift of Life, a Gift of Love

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It is a great honor to speak to you today. I have known this overwhelming task was coming my way for the last year or so. The Spirit has whispered it to me. And I, well, I have tried to ignore those feelings. It seemed too important a task to fall to me, so I tried to push the thought aside. But it returned from time to time and I thought, “Oh my, what could I ever talk about that would be worthy of the whole student body?” I would think about a few possible ideas but then quickly push them out of my mind again. I thought, “No! No! No! They’re not going to call me.”

So when the dreaded phone call came, I was not surprised. Not really. Vice President Skousen said I could speak on any subject I’d like—maybe something from my profession or my research, maybe something else. He left it completely up to me! And within 10 minutes of hanging up—as I sat there somewhat stunned—I knew clearly what I must speak about.

I was reminded of the fact that I had once heard that the topics for talks at general conference are not assigned. This is a wonderful testimony to me: our leaders leave the inspiration up to the speakers. I asked myself, “What is the greatest blessing I have received from the Lord?” And I knew the answer and I had a detailed outline in my mind of what I

should say, something that I might be uniquely qualified to speak about.

It is truly humbling to stand at this podium, for this is the place where prophets stand to speak perhaps more than any other place except Temple Square. I served on a committee a few years ago that looked at “the university experience.” I had access there to research done by the university, including surveys of alumni who had graduated in the past five years, 10 years, or 20 years. The university experience uniformly rated the highest by all groups was that of the weekly devotionals.

I remember some of the devotionals from my own experience as a student here 30 years ago. I remember a talk by Elder Hinckley—then a junior member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles—entitled “The Loneliness of Leadership” (4 November 1969). It was an interesting talk and quite revealing of the way the Lord works with our leaders. Since that time, as I’ve watched our General Authorities, I have thought of that talk and my admiration for our leaders has grown.

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I remember a talk by Marion D. Hanks when he said, “Blossom where you are planted.” He spoke of life in these times, when we may get employment that takes us to the ends of the earth—sometimes quite literally. He spoke of moving to a place where we may study or have some training and only plan to be there for a few years or sometimes only a few months. He said that wherever we are, we should settle in as if we were going to stay for a long time. Don’t live out of your suitcase, he said. Move in. Blossom where you are planted.

In the years since I heard that talk, I’ve moved to Charlestown, Massachusetts; Greenville, South Carolina; Cortland, New York; Somerville, Massachusetts; Dryden, New York; Urbana, Illinois; Seoul, Korea; three different houses in Provo, Utah; Pusan, Korea; and finally back to Provo—and then six study abroad sessions and a one-semester sabbatical in Korea. From time to time I would think of Elder Hanks’ advice as I saw some others who apparently missed that devotional, because they would moan about moving “back home,” “back to Utah,” “back to California,” “back to wherever.” I think of my nephew in Illinois who grew up in Illinois. He says his ward is full of people from “out West” who constantly run down his hometown because it doesn’t measure up somehow to their hometown. Elder Hanks’ advice given in that devotional years ago is still valid: “Blossom where you are planted.”

Thinking of the great talks that have been offered from this podium, I therefore speak to you with a great sense of humility. I hope some of you will remember and be benefited by something I say here today. I am certain that my message will have special meaning to some of you, but I hope that it will have some meaning for all of you.

The title of my talk today is “Adoption: A Gift of Life, a Gift of Love.” I am going to speak about three aspects of adoption. Each will have a varying degree of interest to you,

I suppose. I wrote a book about adoption as it has been practiced in Korea and in much of the rest of Asia. I will tell you about some of my own experiences with adoption and adoption in this country and in the Church, and finally I will speak about adoption as it pertains to all of us as the seed of Abraham.

I think this message will have particular meaning for some of you: those of you who are adopted, those of you who will someday adopt a child or two, and those of you who have siblings who are adopted. I think my message will be helpful to some of you who in future years may be bishops or Relief Society presidents or home teachers or visiting teachers who may be called upon to advise a single mother who is trying to decide what to do. Your advice might mean a life saved, a life blessed, and a life loved.

But aside from these specific cases, I am going to speak to all of you about your adoption into the house of Israel and into the covenant of Abraham. In fact, “Father Abraham” is our father and the one with whom Jehovah established the covenant—and with it the priesthood.

You’ll remember I had been told that I might talk about some of my professional work if I so chose. As it turns out, I wrote a PhD dissertation and later had it published as a book entitled *Korean Adoption and Inheritance*. The title could be misleading to the general public, but it fits into a genre of literature in east Asian studies on family and lineage and history. The subtitle tells you more of what the book is about: *The Creation of a Classic Confucian Society*. It deals with 17th-century Korea and how Korea became thoroughly indoctrinated by Confucian ideology as reflected in changes in the family structure and as seen in adoption and inheritance practices.

In a nutshell, what happened in the late 17th century under growing influence from neo-Confucianism was that the inheritance pattern changed from one where sons and daughters

received property from their parents equally to a system where the eldest son, by the rule of primogeniture, received nearly all of the property. Daughters became disinherited. This change affected the ancestor ceremonies that were so important in Confucianism. Once shared by all sons and daughters, now they were controlled by the eldest son. This change affected the structure of the village, which originally included sons and their wives and daughters with their husbands, with the sons-in-law having all kinds of surnames. Then it became a classic patrilineal village where everyone had the same surname, for they were all *agnates*, a term meaning “men related to men through men.”

Part of this social change in Korea—this new emphasis on the male line—meant that if a couple had only daughters or had no children, they would surely adopt. But adoption in traditional Korea was what is technically known as agnatic adoption—meaning one would adopt the son of one’s brother or one’s cousin. It had to be a son from within the lineage, someone of the same bloodline. I have a graph in my book showing the increase in the practice of adoption. I have another graph showing how daughters were disinherited. A third graph shows how the two lines crisscrossed and the adopted son came to replace the daughter as an heir in the household. This type of adoption was also practiced in China and Japan, but the Koreans were the most orthodox in their application of the principle.

The Chinese were more flexible. In an interesting example from China the preface to one book of genealogy says that only agnatic adoptions would be included in the genealogy and that other adoptions—referred to as adoptions arranged in the marketplace—would not be written in the book. Yet within the book itself were recorded three cases of nonagnatic adoption.

The Japanese, in the Tokugawa period, practiced some agnatic adoption, but they

were more open to other forms, and son-in-law adoption—*mukoyoshi*—was a favored one. Sometimes the Japanese would adopt a daughter so that they could get a son-in-law, who would then become heir to the family name and estate.

In summary, we can say that in traditional Asia many adoptions were inspired by Confucianism, and this is a manifestation of a special gift of life: to keep life going in the family line. It is also a gift of love: a method of maintaining loving ties in a family as expressed in Confucian ceremonies. Some people criticize Confucianism for its suppression of women—and that is certainly an issue—but given the fact that Confucianism became the controlling ideology in Korea, we can certainly find virtue within the Confucian system. One of its strong points was the care and keeping of the family line.

Adoption in Asia is quite different then from adoption in the West. In Korea only a son is adopted, and he must be from within the surname group. A relative from the mother’s side was not adequate; it had to be a son from the father’s side. Only one son was adopted. There was no need for two or more. And the main purpose was so that ceremonies could be carried out for the father and grandfather and the other male ancestors.

Adoption in the West is just the opposite. Either sons or daughters can be adopted. There is no need to quit after one child; rather, one can adopt two or three or—as did my neighbor—nine. The focus is the child, not the ancestors.

Our own adoption case began, I guess, when my wife and I married. Most children come in nine months, if they are on time. Our children took 18 years. The Lord finally took us by the hand and gave us an answer to our prayers. He called us together to preside over a mission in Pusan, Korea. Toward the end of the mission we finally mustered the courage to apply for an adoption. Thankfully an angelic woman

who worked at the adoption agency thought we would be good parents. She knew me from a committee we had served on in Seoul a few years before. I paid her a call and told her we were finally ready. She said she would let us know when an appropriate child was available. Five days later she called: “We have a baby for you to look at.” We flew to Seoul, held that baby in our arms, and our hearts melted. Most couples take nine months. It took us five days. Well, 18 years and five days.

That little baby transformed our mission. She transformed us. We carried her everywhere we went, and we did not slacken in our care for our missionaries.

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]

Through a long and complicated series of events, the Lord provided us the answer to our prayers. We knew it was a great blessing, but we did not know how many lives and many events and many others had done this or that to bring us together to make us a happy family. That little baby grew into a wonderful little girl and is now a lovely young woman. We are grateful and proud to be her parents and feel so blessed that she came into our home.

The adoption of our second child was just as miraculous. The opportunity to go to Korea for a semester came about unexpectedly. It came just when I was coming up for tenure, and when I told my wife we needed to go, not for research or teaching but for an administrative assignment, she said it didn’t make sense. It didn’t. But I told her I had a strong feeling that we should go. Two weeks later, after she had wrestled with the idea, she told me that she finally agreed; we needed to go. Then she said, “There is another baby waiting for us.”

My jaw fell open. I was flabbergasted, but it suddenly made sense. Things fell into place. I went to see my department chair and told him

that I needed an emergency leave and that I needed to go to Korea. He was surprised—and skeptical. But I put all my cards on the table and told him about the adopted daughter that would soon be born, and he completely supported my request. As it turns out, he had special sympathies for me—he, too, was adopted. On short notice I found a perfect replacement to teach my classes. Details on the Korean side were much more complicated, and a series of obstacles appeared in our path, but one by one everything fell into place.

My wife’s mother had died the previous year, and my wife and I are convinced that somehow—I don’t know how these things work—she engineered the details from her side of the veil. Our second baby is the sweetest child a set of parents could ever hope to have. She is a joy to us, and she has become our second greatest blessing. We love these gifts from heaven. They have given us life. They have given us love. We have been sealed for time and all eternity, and we enjoy all the blessings of the temple.

The history of adoption in the restored Church goes back to Joseph Smith. He had two adopted children. Today, LDS Family Services maintains an active Web site as part of its program of matching birth mothers with hopeful parents. If you go to the lds.org page, within just a few clicks you can see a page for birth mothers who are thinking about—as the slogan says—“not giving a child up” but “giving the child more.” On that page are couples looking for their first child and families looking for one more child. I’ve heard of remarkable things that have happened in matching a child with parents. These are little miracles—little miracles that match lives and love in the most marvelous way.

There is a passage in the proclamation on the family that says:

The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan.

Children are entitled to birth [or adoption] within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother. ["The Family: A Proclamation to the World," Ensign, November 1995, 102]

We understand that the birth mother who believes that statement and who chooses to give her child more is a woman who will most likely—by a very high percentage—end up married in the temple and active in the Church. On the other hand, the birth mother who chooses to keep her child to be raised alone most often does not end up married in the temple or active in the Church. Sometimes well-meaning but ill-informed grandparents offer to help when *all* concerned would be happier if the birth mother chose to give her child more.

When a child comes into a home—whether adopted or born naturally—the mother and father will kneel in prayer and offer the sweetest prayer that it is possible to utter. They thank their Heavenly Father for the baby and for the opportunity to raise the baby, and then in deep, deep gratitude they ask for help. In the case of adoptive parents, they offer another important part of the prayer: They thank the Lord for the gift given by the birth mother and then ask Heavenly Father to bless the woman who has in a very real sense been an angel to them—an angel who has literally carried a spirit from heaven into the home of the new parents. In a unique way, the phrase from the hymn “As Sisters in Zion” that says “the errand of angels is given to women” has special meaning when applied to the birth mother (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 309). And the pleas of the new parents to bless the birth mother are answered in rich and unique blessings that are available to her.

Adoptive parents often hear praise or congratulations for taking in a child, but adopted parents never feel deserving of any praise. We even feel such praise is misguided. We feel grateful that the child, a child of God, has entered our lives to bless us—not the other way around. This may sound odd, but it is

true. In a sense parents are not as altruistic as they are self-serving. It is we, the parents, who are blessed by the action of adoption. And that blessing lasts throughout life and eternity. Adoption is a gift of life—not just for the child who has life but also for the parents who have life added to them.

Adoptive parents sometimes dislike hearing someone ask about the “real father” or the “real mother.” Our unspoken response is, “What? I’m not real? Why, I’m as real as it gets!” Actually, it is not a simple matter to be a *real* father or mother. A real father *becomes* a real father by tenderly caring for the baby; changing diapers; feeding the baby baby food; cleaning up after feeding the baby; sitting up late at night tending an ill child; laughing; playing; taking the growing child to the first day of school and to many days of school thereafter and to games, to movies, to church. That is what is real. No, don’t make a mistake about who the real father is. The *real* father is the one who is there hour after hour, day after day, year after year.

What I have said about adopted children is true in cases of stepchildren as well. In remarriage and starting families anew are great blessings of love and life that can come to the parents and the children in those situations as well.

At times a single parent must raise his or her children on their own. And some saintly women have that challenge. One such woman was the mother of Elder Dallin H. Oaks and Elder Merrill Oaks—one of the rare sets of brothers who serve as General Authorities. Another such woman was my grandmother, who raised my father and three other children alone. At times a single father has that challenge. Single parents are entitled to special blessings to assist them in their saintly duties.

Let me share with you a story of one of the more meaningful experiences I have had at BYU. It is a story within a story. Every year in late August, just before the start of the fall

semester, we faculty have a meeting in the de Jong Concert Hall. It is the duty of the academic vice president to speak to us. The burden must weigh heavily on his shoulders, for he has to say something worthwhile to a bunch of people who know a lot of things. We faculty are not a bunch of “know-it-alls,” but we tend to think we know a lot.

I shall never forget the talk given one year when Todd Britsch was our academic vice president. Professor Britsch has recently retired as a professor of humanities from the Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature Department in our College of Humanities. Not long after I came to BYU, Todd became our dean. Then he was promoted to academic vice president. I knew he had two adopted children. One day we got the word that his son had died.

In Professor Britsch’s talk to the faculty that day in August 1994, he told us of a dream he had had. Here is what he said:

When Dan died at conference time last year, shortly after his 20th birthday, we held his funeral on a Friday. The next Monday, as you would have done, I returned to school and to a busy schedule. But family, church, and BYU responsibilities so occupied my time that I felt I had not really had a chance to mourn his death. Finally, in November, I caught a mild case of flu that forced me to stay home on a Sunday. After a morning filled with reflection, I fell asleep and had the following dream:

I was in a parking lot (probably by the JKHB) walking with my arms full of books and other materials. As I approached my 1967 Volvo, the car I drove to campus for 23 years, I noticed that exhaust was coming from the tailpipe. This concerned me, because I knew that the car keys were in my pocket. I opened the front passenger door because I wanted to put my books on the seat. As I did so, I saw Dan in the back seat, surrounded by his books, writing in a notebook. I told him that I had been surprised that the engine was running, and he replied that he wanted to heat the car while he was studying

because it was cold to him. After an exchange about car keys, Dan said, “Just sit down there. I’ll come up and drive.” As he moved from the back seat and opened the driver’s door, I realized that he was dead. I leaned forward, and we embraced. I felt his whiskers against my cheek and said, “I miss you so much.” With that, I awoke, weeping but strangely and deeply comforted.

As I described this comfort to my wife, she remarked that it was very natural: “It’s because he was at BYU. For years, one of your strongest wishes was for Dan to be a student here.” Dorothy was right. Like many of you, I longed for the time that circumstances would be such that my son could enroll at BYU. It was here that I wanted him to learn the beauty of mathematical formulae. It was at BYU that I hoped he could develop a profound understanding of the scriptures. It was from you [that is, my colleagues on the faculty] that I wanted him to study humanities, biology, the fine arts, sociology, and all of the other wonderful things we get to deal with every day. I believed that his whole life could be changed if he could be a student here. For a moment, at least, it seemed that this had happened.

*Now when I look across the campus, I see tens of thousands of students whose parents’ wishes are much the same as mine. They see in BYU the one place where their children’s eternal education can take place. I hope that we will never take casually the extraordinary faith they place in us. [Todd A. Britsch, 23 August 1994, “Excellence, Charity, and the University,” *Addresses Delivered at the 1994 Annual University Conference* (Provo: BYU, 1994), 24–25]*

There was not a dry eye in the de Jong Concert Hall as we faculty listened to Professor Britsch. I have not looked at my duties at BYU the same since. I marveled at how an academic vice president could speak with such feeling and such power. And I thought, “Only at BYU.”

Todd Britsch—as an adoptive father—might have additional sensitivities that have helped all of us who teach here to understand our

roles as fathers and mothers and to see you as sons and daughters of parents who love you very much and have sent you to college with great hopes riding with you.

I told a friend who has two biological children and one adopted daughter that I was preparing this talk. He said, "You know, I've done a lot of things in my life. I graduated from BYU, attended the top-ranked business school in the country, got a great job with a great bank, and was assigned to work in Korea. I thought it was all about me. But now I know I did all those things so that we could be in the right place at the right time to meet Lori. It wasn't about me. It was about her and our family becoming complete."

I called my friend and read what I had written about him and asked if it was correct. He said it was not only correct but the truth of that statement becomes clearer with each year that passes and that we are only beginning to understand what an eternal family means.

Adoption is truly a gift. It is a gift from our Heavenly Father. It is a gift of life, a gift of love.

But adoption is not limited to the special cases we call "adopted." It pertains to all of us. The Apostle Paul made several references to adoption. He spoke of adoption as the process by which we become members of the covenant, part of the family of Abraham. In five instances Paul used the term *adoption* to indicate the process by which Gentiles and Jews become part of the covenant and members of the family of Abraham. To Paul, the term *adoption* was used to show that those who believe in Jesus become part of a very special family. This is true for all of us who are baptized into the Church today. We become brothers and sisters.

It is perhaps clearest in Galatians:

For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. [Galatians 3:27-29]

The vision of the olive tree, with its branches "grafted in," as recorded in Jacob 5, is another way of looking at this same adoption process.

Becoming a part of the house of Israel is expressed to us in specific terms when we receive our patriarchal blessings. Therein we are told which lineage is ours. This, too, in many cases, is a manifestation of family creation through the process of adoption. Sometimes within one family are some who are of the lineage of Ephraim whereas another might be of Judah or Dan or Manasseh. Membership in each of these lineages is often part of the adoption process of which Paul spoke. When we choose obedience and repentance and partake of the blessing of the covenant, we are welcomed into the household of faith, the Church. We are no more strangers and foreigners but fellow citizens, brothers, and sisters with the Saints.

The principle of adoption also helps us understand one complex and sometimes confusing aspect of our doctrine. I am speaking of the times when Jesus is referred to as our Father. We love the simplicity of Joseph Smith's First Vision. When Joseph walked out of the Sacred Grove, mankind had a clear understanding of the nature of God our Father and of God the Son, Jesus Christ. Our understanding of this point is clear, and we like to think of Jesus as our Elder Brother. But then there are places in the scripture where the term *God the Father* means Jesus. In Mosiah 16:15, Abinadi said, "Teach them that redemption cometh through Christ the Lord, who is the very Eternal Father. Amen."

Let's look at Zeezrom debating Amulek:

Now Zeezrom saith again unto [Amulek]: Is the Son of God the very Eternal Father?

And Amulek said unto him: Yea, he is the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth, and all things which in them are; he is the beginning and the end, the first and the last;

And he shall come into the world to redeem his people; and he shall take upon him the transgressions of those who believe on his name; and these are they that shall have eternal life, and salvation cometh to none else. [Alma 11:38–40]

Here the gift of being an heir—a son or a daughter—means not only a gift of life but also a gift of eternal life. When we choose to obey the gospel, to repent and be baptized, we become sons and daughters of Christ. It is a process not unlike that of adoption.

Abinadi spoke of this process as becoming the sons or the “seed” of Christ (Mosiah 15:10, 11).

And finally, in section 84 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

For whoso is faithful unto the obtaining these two priesthoods of which I have spoken, and the magnifying their calling, are sanctified by the Spirit unto the renewing of their bodies.

They become the sons of Moses and of Aaron and the seed of Abraham, and the church and kingdom, and the elect of God. [D&C 84:33–34]

This is the ultimate gift of life, the ultimate gift of love.

It helps me understand my relationship with my Elder Brother, who is also the Father of this earth, the God who chose “To walk upon his footstool / And be like man, almost” (“O God, the Eternal Father,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 175). He is my Savior and the very Eternal Father. Our biological fathers are really our brothers, too, are they not? We have “fathers of our flesh” and fathers of our spirit—again quoting from Paul (Hebrews 12:9).

I am grateful for the blessings of adoption. I am grateful that one form of adoption has blessed the lives of those who follow Confucianism. I am grateful for another form of adoption that has blessed my life and the lives of many of you. And I am grateful that we have a Father in Heaven whose Only Begotten Son is a Father to those of us who have covenanted to follow Him.

Adoption is a principle with a promise. It is a blessing for me; it is a blessing for you. In one way or another it is a gift of life—sometimes eternal life—and a gift of love that blesses all of us. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.