

Finding Sanctuary

JEFFREY F. RINGER

Like many other parents, my wife, Amy, and I spent a good deal of time watching videos with our kids when they were young. Often those videos contained surprising lessons. For example, in the Disney animated film *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* there is a climactic moment when Quasimodo rescues Esmeralda from the flames and rushes into the Cathedral of Notre Dame, shouting for sanctuary. Whatever liberties the executives at Disney may have taken with Victor Hugo's novel, they are at least drawing on an actual medieval practice that considered the church a place of refuge. During the conflicts between church and state in Europe during the Middle Ages, church land was considered to be beyond the reach of the law and thus a sanctuary, or place of refuge, for those wrongly, or in some cases rightly, accused of crimes. Although the practice of sanctuary was discontinued centuries ago, you can still find sanctuary stones dotting the English countryside, marking the ancient boundaries of refuge for sanctuary seekers.

In a time when we are swept up in a tidal wave of bad news, when the gloomy march of economic misery seems to engulf us all, when natural and man-made disasters occur almost daily, when today's students are told that they are entering a bleak job market and an uncer-

tain economic future, when the screaming heads of an increasingly politicized 24-hour news cycle convince us that things have never been worse, and when each of us quietly—or not so quietly—muddles through a multitude of personal trials, let me suggest that we counter that tide by working to find our own personal sanctuaries in our faith, at our church meetings, in the temple, and in our relationships with family, friends, and the Lord.

Faith

Finding sanctuary begins with understanding who we are and what we believe. Soon after we were married, Amy and I moved to Boulder, where I began a PhD program in political science at the University of Colorado. There were about a dozen of us who entered the program that year, and one of them was a woman named Sandi Samuels. Sandi was a chain-smoking, self-described nonpracticing Jew, and she and I became good friends. One day when I was studying in the group office that PhD students shared in the basement of the building, Sandi walked in, sat on the corner

Jeffrey F. Ringer was director of the BYU David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies when this devotional address was given on 25 May 2010.

of the desk, lit a cigarette (asking if I minded and not waiting for my response), took a long, theatrical drag, and asked, “You’re a Mormon, right?”

You might have thought that a reasonably well-educated returned missionary would rise to the occasion, prepared to deliver a stirring recitation of our beliefs; but instead, I confess, I heard alarm bells in my head. Having been in this situation many times growing up, I knew that inevitably this question was followed by an examination based on some misunderstanding of our beliefs. So I was caught off guard when Sandi simply asked, “What is a Mormon?”

I remember stumbling through some inadequate description of our beliefs that must have satisfied her because the conversation turned to another subject. That little exchange has bothered me over the years, and I’ve rehearsed a thousand better answers to her question than what I gave her.

It is my practice to begin each day by reading the *New York Times*. It is a habit I picked up in graduate school and have continued since. I’m a great advocate of reading quality newspapers, and it’s one of the reasons that the David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies distributes free copies of the *Times*. In the buildup to the 2002 Olympic Games in Salt Lake City, I was interested to read the media coverage of Utah, particularly how the culture and dominant religion were portrayed.

As each article came out I eagerly read through to see how we were described. With increasing frustration, I kept trying to find myself in those articles. I barely recognized the culture and religious beliefs being described. The facts were in order, but the meaning was missing. Frustrated, I composed a hundred letters to the editor in my head, explaining who we really were, what we believe, and how we live. In the end I resigned myself to something that scholars have long known: understanding a culture from the outside is an extraordinarily difficult thing.

However frustrating outside critiques may be, the bigger obstacle to finding sanctuary is when we begin to misunderstand our own beliefs—when we allow our faith to be diminished and trivialized. That can occur if we rewrite our own history, concluding that “my mission wasn’t that meaningful” or “I didn’t really have that experience.” In so doing, we fall prey to the situation described by George Orwell in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* when he wrote: “Who controls the past . . . controls the future: who controls the present controls the past” (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* [New York: Penguin, 1950], 32).

At our worst, we caricature our own beliefs, making them seem small, insignificant, and slightly embarrassing. In the end we come to believe that our religion is no more than a series of interesting social customs and that our faith is as easily discarded as an unwanted gym membership.

I suppose we are known for many things, including some valuable social behaviors, but let us be clear about our faith. As inspired as these teachings are, we are not the church of the people who don’t date until they’re 16 or the church of the people who don’t drink coffee. Others may want to circumscribe our religion, to make it small and tidy. But we must not let ourselves shrink our religion or let our own thinking be made small. We are the Church of Jesus Christ, and we seek to follow Him and put His teachings into practice in our own lives. In so doing we find sanctuary in our faith.

But what about those times when our faith is weak or wavers? Then we must act *as if*. In the words of William Sloan Coffin, the long-time chaplain of Yale University:

It is terribly important to realize that the leap of faith is not so much a leap of thought as of action. For while in many matters it is first we must see, then we will act; in matters of faith it is first we must do then we will know, first we will be and then

we will see. One must, in short, dare to act wholeheartedly without absolute certainty.

Or, as he said more succinctly:

I love the recklessness of faith. First you leap, and then you grow wings. [William Sloan Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 7]

Remember also the lesson recorded in Joshua 3. The waters of the Jordan River were not stopped until the priests stepped into the river. Faith compels action, and we nourish that faith by communicating with the Lord.

My assignment at the university requires me to have some infrequent contact with Church headquarters, especially as it relates to hosting or to a program I direct in China. A couple of years ago, Amy and I were making our annual pilgrimage to Disneyland with the kids when my cell phone rang. We were driving south on I-15 at the time, just passing through Las Vegas. I looked at the caller ID, knowing that I had asked my secretary to forward only emergency calls, and I saw that it was coming from a 240 prefix—the prefix of the Church Office Building.

Knowing I had to answer this call, I asked the kids to be quiet and said hello. A formal female voice replied, saying, “Please hold for Elder Oaks.” Immediately I was nervous. For him to be tracking me down on my cell phone suggested that there was a problem. For some reason I felt guilty even taking the call while I was driving through Vegas on my way to Disneyland, so I told the kids to be quiet with a little more urgency and waited for Elder Oaks to come on the line. Fortunately, I had a ready answer to his question, and, mercifully, the call ended quickly.

I’ve been thinking about that call, and other calls I’ve had over the years, in connection with prayer. If I respond so seriously to conversations with General Authorities and other

Church officers, why am I inclined to occasionally treat communication with my Father in Heaven so casually?

We are instructed to “counsel with the Lord in all thy doings” (Alma 37:37). I suspect that none of us is able to spend all day on bended knee counseling with the Lord. There are classes to attend, chores to do, meals to cook, and a thousand other things each of us needs to do every day. What, then, might it mean to “counsel . . . in all thy doings”? Clearly, part of it involves regular, formal prayers; but to me it also suggests an attitude of living—the recognition of our dependence on our Heavenly Father and a commitment to seek and know His will.

Several years ago the “What would Jesus do?” movement became very popular. It was inspired originally, I believe, by our friends in the evangelical community. Before it became a marketing tool used to sell merchandise, it contained a helpful reminder: to keep our relationship with the Lord in our minds as we make decisions throughout the day.

Early in our marriage, Amy had a friend who took this teaching quite seriously. She counseled with the Lord in all aspects of her life, including seemingly trivial matters like what to cook for dinner or how to decorate her apartment. Amy and I used to laugh at this, confident that the Lord didn’t need to be troubled with such minutia of daily life and thinking that such prayers suggested a kind of unhealthy spiritual dependency. Now, with a little more life experience, I’m less quick to dismiss these kinds of prayers. I still don’t find myself asking the Lord about paint colors for the walls, but I’m more inclined to believe that constant communication forms part of the fabric of a necessary relationship with the Lord.

For me it makes some sense to relate it to parenthood. Each of our children has different ways of communicating with Amy and me. We’ve tried to raise them to be independent, capable adults, something I hope they’re on

their way to becoming. But on the way I've noticed some interesting things. Our oldest daughter, Kelsey, just finished her junior year at BYU. She lives in an apartment with friends and manages her life about as well as any 20-year-old could be expected to do. She also calls us just about every day, often with what seem to be nonquestions. Amy and I used to laugh about it, but it has gradually dawned on me that there may be a purpose in those calls. Kelsey doesn't really need us to answer the question she's asking; she needs us to know what she's doing and that she's thinking about us and values our opinions.

Our other children have their own ways of communicating. Some of them want to tell us lots of details and practically demand our attention, while others are happy to simply know we're there. I suspect the same holds true for each of our relationships with the Lord. They are colored by our own personalities and needs, and they each march to their own individual rhythms.

But what remains true for all of us is the need to counsel with the Lord. The key, I think, lies in the word *counsel*. It suggests a very different kind of prayer than those we sometimes fall into the trap of reciting. My wife and I have been pretty good throughout our married life at making sure that each day ends with our family on our knees praying together. Unfortunately, not all of those prayers rise to the level of counseling with the Lord. There is the inevitable giggling or recitation of rote lines. Years ago our younger son began using the word *cuponus* in his prayers. At first I was a little baffled, thinking it soundly vaguely Latin. What it turned out to be was his young mind trying to make sense of the phrase "come upon us," which apparently we all used routinely in our evening prayers. It was nothing to him but a collection of sounds that he figured had to fit into a prayer at some point. Perhaps many of us at times fall into the trap of routinized prayers that fall far short

of the goal of counseling with the Lord. In so doing, we starve our faith and delay finding sanctuary.

Church

Entering the great cathedrals of Europe invokes an immediate sense of awe at the majesty of the architecture and at the dedication it took to build these great monuments. Walking into a modern LDS building may not have the same effect on us. The architecture is much less grand and the interiors much more practical. Nevertheless, they should and ought to be weekly places of sanctuary for each of us. In D&C 115:6 the Lord says, "The gathering together upon the land of Zion, and upon her stakes, may be for a defense, and for a refuge from the storm."

To the outsider, the three-hour meeting time on Sunday, depending on the ward, must seem to have elements of a worship service, a neighborhood gathering, a singles social event, a day care, and a K–12 school with some adult education thrown in. Too often, even to those of us in the Church, it can feel more like work than worship. But at the heart of those three hours is the ordinance of the sacrament and the opportunity to renew our baptismal covenants—the opportunity to witness again to the Lord that we not only believe, but that we also will do.

To find sanctuary at our church meetings, our responsibility is twofold: to ourselves and to others. To ourselves we have the responsibility to rethink, if necessary, our approach to our weekly meetings and to treat them less like an assignment and more like worship. I'm well aware of the challenges of getting kids out of bed and ready while worrying about the Primary, Sunday School, Relief Society, or priesthood lesson we need to teach and the difficulty of feeling reverent when our young kids throw their Cheerios and our teenagers sleep open-mouthed through the services. But somehow, we must find that reverence. We can

all take practical steps to make sure that we are more prepared for Sabbath services, but we can also make an inner commitment to refocus and recommit to the core purpose of worship.

We have the responsibility to enrich the experiences of others in the congregation as well. On several occasions my family has lived in London and attended a local branch or ward. These few scattered branches in a city of 12 million people are vital sanctuaries for the members. They are places where they can meet with fellow Saints and rejoice in their company. Obviously, our situation is different here, but we could learn something from those British Saints, many of whom are both recent immigrants to the UK and recent converts to the Church. They look forward to each Sunday, often traveling long distances, and greet each other like family members. The meetings may not always run with the precision of a Wasatch Front ward and may not always adhere to standard operating procedures, but there is a palpable joy in being together in a community of Saints. Let us work to bring that same sense of community to our services—the same inclusiveness, the same fellowship—and we may begin to feel the sanctuary of our weekly services.

Temple

A few years ago, Amy and I were in Hong Kong on assignment from the university and attended a session at the Hong Kong Temple. After the session we received a briefing from the Asia Area Presidency on the state of the Church in Asia. In the course of the briefing, Elder Kent D. Watson showed a picture of an elderly Mongolian woman standing in front of her yurt, the traditional Mongolian tent. He went on to explain that this sister, a recent convert to the Church, had, over the course of many months, saved her money so that she could pay for the four-day train ride from Mongolia to Hong Kong to attend the temple for the first time. She did all this at her own

expense without any monetary support from the Church. As I looked at the picture of this dedicated sister and thought of her four-day train ride, my own commitment to the temple seemed rather pale in comparison.

Amy and I live near Kiwanis Park on the east side of campus, so rather than a four-day train ride on hard seats, we have about a four-minute car drive on comfortable car seat cushions. Yet it may as well be a four-day train ride sometimes. I can easily find two hours to watch my friend coach a basketball game in the Marriott Center, but finding the same amount of time to be in the temple feels somehow more difficult.

I fear that for some of us, the convenience of a temple may have led to casualness about the temple. And yet it is there that we can find, as Isaiah said, “a place of refuge, and . . . a covert from storm and from rain” (Isaiah 4:6). Let us all recommit to finding sanctuary in the temple, to treat it as a refuge from the daily grind. In the temple we find peace, we find truth, we find God.

Relationships

I’ve reached the stage of my life commonly known as middle age, and I expect it’s a consequence of that stage to become a bit more reflective, so permit me a few words about families. I recognize that in the audience are people at all stages of family life. Some are still firmly embedded in their parents’ families, others are just starting their own. Amy and I are now sending children out of the house rather than welcoming them in. I suppose we all have moments of clarity that strike each of us in different ways—on a walk, listening to music, reading the scriptures. Mine typically come at 34,000 feet over the Pacific Ocean, stuck in seat 44C in economy class.

I had one of these moments a couple of summers ago, flying back from Shanghai, trying unsuccessfully to get comfortable while Amy snoozed contentedly beside me. I started

thinking of my kids—at that time Taylor was almost back from his mission, Kelsey had just finished her freshman year at BYU, and Eliza was about to join Hansen at Provo High. It reminded me that when I took a job at BYU, Kelsey was a newborn, and Hansen and Eliza weren't born yet. Amy and I were that young couple with the little kids on the ward picture board.

Despite how I may still feel about myself, I recognize that we aren't that family anymore. What surprises me is how quickly it has gone and, as we sit around and reminisce, what it is the kids remember. Some of it, certainly, is the big events and the accomplishments. But more of it is the minutia, the day-to-day stuff of life: the made-up stories when we're desperately trying to get the kids in bed, the attempts at family prayer and scripture study that may not have turned out perfectly, or the trips to 7-Eleven for a Slurpee.

As every parent knows, the lessons we think we're teaching our kids aren't always the lessons they are learning. Back in 2000 we were living in London directing the Study Abroad Program. It was our kids' first time in the city, so we spent a couple of days walking around the neighborhood and helping them get settled. On one of these walks down a busy street, Amy noticed a bus number that she had been wondering about, and since it was one of the old Routemaster buses with the driver up front and a conductor in the back, she hopped on the back platform to ask the conductor about its route and cost. Satisfied, she hopped back off, and the bus started to drive away. What we hadn't noticed was that Hansen had followed her onto the bus. And as it drove away, we had a perfect view of his eight-year-old face looking quizzically at us from the back platform. A million things go through a parent's mind at a time like this, including, "How in the world is he ever going to find his way back when he doesn't have any money, doesn't know the city, and has no idea where we live?"

Panicking that she would never be able to find him again, Amy started yelling, "Jump!" In a panic of what would happen if he jumped off a speeding bus onto a busy street, I started yelling, "Don't jump!" Caught in that awkward moment of conflicting parental demands, Hansen froze, uncertain what to do. Luckily, an observant businessman grabbed him, stopped him from jumping, and notified the driver to pull over.

In the aftermath of our little scare, we went to a great deal of effort to establish a family safety travel plan. If any of the kids ever got separated from the family, they were to get off at the next bus or Tube stop and wait for the family to catch up. On a subsequent trip we had occasion to put the plan into practice. We had ridden the light rail to Greenwich and were returning to London. The kids had run ahead, pushed the "Open Door" button on the train, and gotten on. We followed them and pushed the button for the door to open. It didn't work on the first push or on any of the increasingly vigorous pushes that followed. Instead the train began to pull away, and we watched as our kids waved goodbye with their faces pressed against the window. Again we were saved by the kindness of other passengers, who notified the conductor; the train was stopped and the doors manually opened.

In our debriefing afterward, we asked the kids what they would have done if the train hadn't stopped. Fully expecting that they would tell us that they would have followed the family plan, our youngest, Eliza, instead said that she would have ridden the train into the city and switched to the Tube at Bank Station, ridden it to Queensway, walked down Bayswater Road, turned right on Palace Court, and gone to our home at number 27. I was stuck wondering how in the world she had learned to navigate the transportation system of one of the largest cities in the world and how in the world she had gotten our family plan so wrong.

Of all the lessons we try to teach our kids, there is one that we must get right: it is the lesson that they are loved. Perhaps the greatest gift my parents ever gave me was the gift of never wondering if I was loved, never wondering if they were proud of me, never wondering where I fit in their hierarchy of priorities. That's the gift I hope I've given to my children. For each of us, home ought to be our daily sanctuary.

I've on occasion heard people speak about their marriages and say things like "I've never spoken a word I regretted" or "We've never gone to bed angry with each other." It's not that I don't admire the sentiment or these people—I just don't know who they are and how they do it. Amy and I are certainly not perfect, and I may have spoken a few words I regretted and made her angry at me more than once, but I have never doubted that she is the one I want to spend eternity with. It is a love so deep and so fundamental to who we are that it trumps any of the problems that life brings.

There is enough criticism at school and work for a child or spouse without them having to face it at home, too. Outside of the home there is always someone smarter, prettier, more athletic, or better educated. In the home we should all feel loved, respected, and accepted, knowing that among these people and in this place, we have our sanctuary.

Personal Sanctuary

Finding sanctuary in our faith, at our church, in the temple, and in our relationships may not help us pass the test we haven't prepared for, find the perfect job, or save a wayward child or roommate. But it does promise the peace that comes when each of us finds the ultimate sanctuary in a personal relationship with our Lord and Savior. That peace and assurance can sometimes take time to find. Discipleship is not earned in a day, a week, or a year. It is earned through the sustained exercise of faith and commitment during the variety of

challenges each of us will face in our lives. The challenges may appear unequal from person to person, but they give each of us the opportunity to learn, grow, and *become*. Discipleship requires patience with ourselves and with our situations.

One of the enduring questions in theology is often phrased as follows: If God loves us so much, why is life so hard? Why do some endure miserable living conditions, broken home lives, and unbearable pain, while others seem to coast through life with a silver spoon in their mouth? I don't know that I have a fully satisfactory answer to that question, but I do know that the differing situations we face in life do not correspond to how much our Father loves each of us. I trust that one aspect of God's love is His desire for the ones He loves to fulfill their full potential. Parents who understand divine love ask more of their children; teachers who understand this demand more of their students; and a God who authored this allows each of us to be tested so that we can progress along the path to the divine.

No stranger to suffering himself, Elder Neal A. Maxwell wrote:

*The justice of God permits no special deal for disciples. We must subdue our selfishness; we must endure the pain of prioritizing. We must cope with the variables of the second estate. There can be no later outcry by the nonbelievers that they were ultimately deprived of an equal chance to believe and to follow. For disciples there is no spiritual equivalent to the "prime rate" or the "most-favored nation" clause. [Neal A. Maxwell, *The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book*, ed. Cory H. Maxwell (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 91; emphasis in original]*

Brothers and sisters, there is no cramming for discipleship, no CliffsNotes, no accelerated courses. It is an education that proceeds according to the rhythm of our lives as we meet the challenges presented to us. The

blessings of discipleship unfold slowly as we act on Christ’s teachings and bear with patience and humility the lessons we are taught. And the blessings of discipleship take the form of the most important victories in our lives—no fanfare or public notice, no awards or trophies—just the personal and infinitely more meaningful victory of the soul that allows us to come to know Christ and to understand the purpose of mortality.

In the meantime, we must, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “plow in hope” (1 Corinthians 9:10). The patience of a disciple can sometimes extend to the next generation. Finding patient sanctuary in his old age, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “Too old to plant trees for my own gratification, I shall do it for my posterity” (Letter to Constantine Samuel Rafinesque [October 9, 1822], in Edwin M. Betts, “The Correspondence between Constantine Samuel Rafinesque and Thomas Jefferson,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* [Lancaster, Pennsylvania: Lancaster Press, 1944], 87:377).

I apologize to those of you who have heard me tell this story before, but, as some of you know, I was raised in what we refer to in the Church as a part-member home. My mom was an Idaho farm girl who had moved to the big city, Idaho Falls, to be a telephone operator. My dad was the son of a Pennsylvania coal miner who joined the navy at 17 and was, several years later, sent to Idaho to train at the nuclear reactor facility for his assignment on the first nuclear submarine, the *Nautilus*. There they met, fell in love, and eloped to the romantic getaway of Elko, Nevada.

During those years, my dad was a wonderful father and a devoted husband, but he was not interested in my mother’s faith. My mom found herself living on a submarine base in New London, Connecticut, with four young children and a husband who was out to sea for months at a time. I wonder how easy it would have been for her to slip away from the Church, to take a week off, to make the under-

standable excuse that it was just too hard to get the kids to church by herself. But she never did. She cured our bouts of “Sunday sickness,” served faithfully in her callings, and never took the easy way out.

As an adult I realize that everything I became in the Church I owe to my mother. I don’t want to romanticize growing up without a father in the Church—there were difficult moments for my mom that I was oblivious to and things that I missed out on as a child. But it did free me of one all-too-common misperception in the Church: growing up the way I did, I was never burdened with the false belief that women are in any way less capable or less fundamental to the gospel plan than are men. For those of you who know Amy, you won’t be surprised to hear that I’ve relearned that lesson every day for the past 25 years.

There is too often a mismatch between our professions of the sanctity of womanhood and motherhood and our behavior that demeans and diminishes. We do no damage to God’s eternal plan in behaving this way, but we certainly endanger our role in that plan.

Many of us find ourselves in situations where we fight against hopelessness, wondering why things haven’t gone the way we had them planned out when we were young. Sometimes we recognize the consequences of our own choices, and other times we suffer from the consequences of others’ choices. But there is always hope.

For 51 years my mother went to church without a husband as they moved from submarine bases on the East Coast to shore duty in Missouri to postnavy life in Colorado and then retirement in Utah to be near their kids. A few days before my father’s 75th birthday, he was baptized; when he was 76 we were sealed in the temple as a family; and now at 79 he serves with my mother in a small branch, ministering to those in a care facility in Orem. My dad is in the branch presidency, and my mom is in the Relief Society presidency. These past four years

didn't make the previous half-century easier; they just made it worth it. It's the same for all of us—it may not be tomorrow or next month or next year, but it will be worth it.

Paul described Abraham as one “who against hope believed in hope” (Romans 4:18). There may be times that that is all we have to cling to. But the ultimate reward of that hope is the sanctuary of a personal relationship with the Lord. That is the good news. As recorded

in 2 Samuel 22:3, “The God of my rock; in him will I trust: he is my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my high tower, and my refuge, my saviour.” Or as written in Deuteronomy 33:27, “The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” We can find sanctuary in good times and bad in the open, loving arms of a Father in Heaven and a Savior who love us both for who we are and who we may become. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.