

# *Life Lessons from the Front*

MITT ROMNEY

**I**t is an honor to be here today and to address you. It seems like only a few years ago that I sat where you are sitting—actually, it was in the Wilkinson Center. Things were different then: the Beatles were the only boy band, Bell Telephone was the only telephone company in the country, BYU cafeteria food was all they served in the Cougareat, and Emma was Joseph Smith’s only wife.

I was an English major, and that meant that I liked reading and writing. It also meant that I had no idea what I was going to do with my career. The self-help guides that I read said I was doomed, because they claimed that in order to have a successful life, you had to have a clear goal in mind and then work relentlessly toward that goal.

But that isn’t how life worked out for me. As a matter of fact, almost nothing I have done in my career was planned in advance. I could hardly have predicted that I would get into politics, for instance. When I stepped into the auditorium to debate Ted Kennedy in Boston’s famous Faneuil Hall, I turned to Ann and asked, “Sweetie, in your wildest dreams did you ever see me running for U.S. Senate?”

And she said, “Mitt, you weren’t in my wildest dreams.”

I have gotten some mileage out of that line, but the truth is she didn’t really say that. That was a joke I bought from a campaign joke writer. And every time I hear some politician use that joke, I feel like demanding a royalty.

You probably know that the most remarkable of my life’s journeys was the one I only recently completed, and that was having the honor of running for president of the United States. In case you haven’t heard, I lost. Actually, I prefer to say that I won the silver medal. It is something that gives you perspective. After Walter Mondale had the misfortune of running against Ronald Reagan and losing badly—he got shellacked in that race—he remarked that he had always wanted to run for president in the worst way. And that is just what he did.

Despite the loss, the experience was extraordinary and revealing. I have come away more optimistic about the country. I have met people from across the nation—people who don’t make the nightly news but who make daily innovations and discoveries that propel our

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*Mitt Romney was the former governor of Massachusetts when this forum address was delivered on 18 November 2014.*

economy and provide for our futures. I have met parents who sacrifice their resources and their careers, in some cases, for their kids, and I have met military men and women who willingly serve in some of the world's most hostile environments. And while it is fashionable in some circles to deny it, I firmly believe that America is the greatest nation on earth.

The experiences I had during my campaign also impressed upon me singular life lessons. I thought I might share a few of them with you today.

### **Reaching Out**

At the beginning of a campaign you experience a good deal of what I call unwelcome anonymity: nobody knows who you are. Occasionally someone would come up to me and say, "You look familiar. Who are you?"

I have a standard response to this. I reply, "I'm Tom Brady of the New England Patriots."

This evokes a predictable laugh. But there was one time, however, when a fellow said, "Oh, I'm a fan. Can I get a picture?"

And I said, "Sure." I can only imagine the guffaws when he proudly showed that picture to his friends.

There was another time when I was reminded of my anonymity. I was at a Marriott hotel in San Francisco, and I had arranged for a massage to loosen my back. After hundreds and hundreds of handshakes in a day, my back got tight on the right side. After the massage, the masseuse, who obviously was unaware of my political career, remarked to my assistant, "Mr. Romney has strong legs. He is a dancer, isn't he?" That's probably the best compliment I got during the campaign.

But the anonymity is soon lost, and in some remarkable ways. During my last campaign I was taken aside by one of our national security agencies, and I was informed that all my emails were being closely read by a foreign government. In fact, the same was true for all the people who had emailed me—my staff,

friends, and family. Their emails were also being monitored by that government.

The words of a hymn came to mind: "Angels above us are silent notes taking Of ev'ry action; then do what is right!"<sup>1</sup> The government involved was no angel, but our words and deeds may well be recorded in heaven—and, I presume, so are the pages we open on the Internet and the sites we browse. Our anonymous surfing may not be recorded on earth, but it surely leaves an imprint in the book of life. Remember, every day you are writing your autobiography.

Early in a campaign it can be difficult to attract an audience to a political rally, particularly if it is during working hours. I remember one event we had scheduled in New Hampshire. We have a summer home in Wolfeboro, New Hampshire, but the rally was at least an hour away from our home. I knew that the media that followed the campaign would read a lot into whether or not I had attracted a crowd to this event. So you can imagine how relieved I was to step onto the stage and see a large and enthusiastic audience greeting me. Looking closer, I realized I was looking at almost the entire Wolfeboro Branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Fortunately the media hadn't figured that out!

There may be times in your life when you feel that it is a bit of a burden being a member of the Church. Some folks will think you are not Christian, some may be insulted that you don't drink with them, and others may think you are trying to be better than them by not swearing. But based on that experience and many others in my life, I can affirm that your fellow members of the Church will be a blessing that far more than compensates. They will bless you when you are sick, lift you up when you fall, help you raise a teenager, counsel you about a job, and, yes, even move your unpacked junk into an apartment. We are not perfect. As a matter of fact, in many things we

are probably no better than anyone else, but we are remarkably good as a people at reaching out our hands to one another in need. Decide to be one of those who does just that.

### **Incomparable Worth**

A campaign can be a heady thing as well. At my first 2012 presidential debate, in Denver, the miles of interstate expressway from my hotel to the auditorium were closed to all traffic—for me. My motorcade was led by thirty or so police motorcycles and vehicles flashing their red and blue lights. I was accompanied by the Secret Service, which included not only the detail of agents that surrounded Ann and me in our bulletproof SUV but also the tactical unit that followed, armed with machine guns and sitting with an open tailgate, facing any vehicle that might come from behind us.

The Secret Service was only the icing on the adulation cake. Day after day, thousands of people were shouting my name, investing in me their hopes for victory. The day before the election, Kid Rock electrified a packed arena in New Hampshire for me, and when we were introduced, the crowd cheered for Ann and me for three solid minutes before we could speak.

The day after the election was different. The Secret Service was gone. They had asked to stay on another week, but we felt that was an unnecessary imposition on them and the taxpayers. The cheers were gone as well, replaced by the agonizing reappraisal by others of what had gone wrong. I was back to driving my own car, filling my own gas tank, and buying groceries at Costco, just like I had been doing for several decades before.

Truthfully, Ann and I had never become caught up in all the flurry. I know that may be hard to believe, but throughout the journey we saw ourselves in exactly the same way we have throughout our marriage. We knew that win or lose, any acclaim would eventually

be forgotten. As Jimmy Durante once sang, “Fame, if you win it, comes and goes in a minute.”<sup>2</sup>

What we treasure from the campaign was not the pomp and the popularity, it was the friends we made. We became very close with a number of the Secret Service agents we spent time with. In fact, as we prepared to go onto the stage to concede the victory to President Barack Obama, more than one of those agents fought back tears. We miss them as friends—not as power candy.

Living life can be self-consuming: who you are can be overshadowed by what you do or by what you have done. If you allow that to happen, the inevitable twists and turns of secular life can warp your self-confidence, limit your ambition, test your faith, and depress your happiness. You are not defined by secular measures. You are a child of a Heavenly Father who loves you. You are His work and His glory. And that statement confirms your incomparable worth. It also informs your life’s most important work: to lift others, to lift your family and your spouse if you’re married, and to remain true and faithful to the Almighty.

### **Work Hard**

Now, I can’t speak of my election loss without adding a few thoughts about how I think God works. I know that’s well above my pay grade. But after five decades of adult life and many years of pastoring in the Church, I have come to some preliminary conclusions.

First, God does not always intervene in the affairs of men to make things work out the way we would like them to. In our heads we all know that. But I can’t tell you how many members of the Church I have spoken with over my life who think God will help their business succeed or help them get the promotion they want or make their investments profitable. I don’t think God will intervene to help you get

rich. There may be exceptions, but I wouldn't count on it. What He does guarantee is written in Doctrine and Covenants 90:24:

*Search diligently, pray always, and be believing, and all things shall work together for your good, if ye walk uprightly and remember the covenant wherewith ye have covenanted one with another.*

I once rode in a car with Elder F. Enzo Busche, then of the Seventy. As I recall the conversation—and it has been a while—he related that when he was a businessman in Germany, the company that he owned was in dire condition, on a path toward bankruptcy and liquidation. He was distraught. One night, in great pain and sadness, he went into a field, knelt in the cold and dark, and poured out his heart to the Lord, hour after hour. Miraculously, he actually heard a voice from heaven. But only one word was spoken: *work*.

More often than not, our secular affairs are up to us. Don't count on God to save you from the consequences of your decisions or to arrange earthly affairs to work in your favor.

### **Purpose and Perspective**

One of the things I think defines the great majority of Americans I met during the campaign and afterward is that they live for a purpose greater than themselves—their school, their university, their community, their nation, their church. During my campaign Ann and I were frequently reminded of our greater purpose.

You may find it hard to imagine what it is like to debate an opponent on national television. I was not a high school debater. In fact, until I got into politics, the only person I had ever debated was my five-year-old son Matt. And he usually won.

My 2012 campaign had twenty-three televised debates—twenty with fellow Republicans and three with President Obama. These guys were no debate slouches. Newt Gingrich had

been Speaker of the House, and President Obama had been president for four years. He kind of had his facts nailed down by then.

You may have read that one of the candidates this year for governor of Florida put a fan under his podium when he debated. I know why: debating can be sweaty business.

Before every one of my debates I did something to keep things in perspective, to keep myself grounded. At the top of the sheet of paper that was always placed on the podium so we could make notes during the debate, I wrote one word: *Dad*. I also drew a small image of the sun. Throughout the debate, when I would glance down at that paper to look at the notes I had taken, I was reminded of my father's fearlessness in fighting for what he believed was right. And the sun? That reminded me of course of the familiar scripture "Let your light so shine."<sup>3</sup> Whether I won or lost that debate, I hoped I would never do anything that would dishonor or discredit the things I hold most dear.

During your life you are going to encounter circumstances that will make you sweat. For many of you the exams and tests won't be over when you graduate. You will all stand at podiums, stand in front of a boss to ask for a raise, or work on some critical project in your employment that will make a big difference in your life. At moments like those, perspective is a very powerful friend. You can welcome perspective through preparatory prayer, by considering the blessings of the temple, or by simply glancing at your CTR ring. Find ways to keep your life in perspective.

### **Heroes Needed**

One of the most meaningful aspects of my campaign was meeting remarkable people. I met Lech Wałęsa in Poland. When the Soviet Union invaded Poland, they rounded up thousands of that nation's most influential people, and then they shot them. There was to be no leader available for a revolt. And

against that backdrop, this shipyard electrician said no—no to the oppression and no to the Soviets. He formed a union—Solidarity—of fellow workers and created a barricade behind shipyard gates. And the communists blinked. What followed was a movement that led to the freedom of an entire nation.

When I met this hero, I was honored. He welcomed me in and said, “You have come a long way. You must be tired. You sit, I’ll talk, you listen.”

And so I did. Time and again he implored, “The world needs American leadership. Where is American leadership?” He would go region by region of the world and say, “We need American leadership.”

At the end of our meeting—and I had said almost nothing—he endorsed my candidacy for president. He taught me a lesson. I guess I don’t recall being more humbled than I was that day with Lech Wałęsa.

I also met Cardinal Timothy Dolan in the rectory of New York City. His is a mighty voice for religious freedom.

I met Billy Graham at his mountain home. He prayed for me. His, of course, is a voice that has long called people to come to Jesus.

I met the former Lutheran bishop of Stockholm. His counsel on judging other religions was instructive. He said that he had three rules for understanding another faith: First, learn about that faith from one of its adherents, not from one of its detractors. Second, compare the best of one religion with the best of another, not the best of one with the worst of another. And third, leave room for religious jealousy.

I inquired what he meant by religious jealousy. He explained that in every religion he has encountered, there is something he wishes were also part of his religion. Among Mormons, he spoke of our missionary program; among Catholics, their reverence for the Pope.

From all the admirable and heroic people I met, I was impressed with the enormity of the influence of one single person. Time and

again, one person makes all the difference in the lives of multitudes. One man ushered in the freedom of an entire nation. One man led an evangelical awakening. And, as we know, one man restored the Church of Jesus Christ to the earth.

Each of you here will influence other lives. Think of that. Perhaps you will shape history; perhaps you will shape one person’s history. Consider with care how you act, what you say, and what you devote your life to, because, I assure you, your choices will shape the lives of other people.

I met others during my campaign I call heroes, though not quite so famous. At one of my first speeches in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the applause from the audience seemed to be instigated by someone with a loud, piercing shout. “Isn’t he wonderful?” she would yell, or “We love you, Mitt! You’re the best!” I can assure you that I was as pleased as I was startled.

After my remarks, this delightful middle-aged woman named Joni Scotter made her way up to the stage and threw her arms around me. That was the first time I met Joni, but it was far from the last. Over the years of campaigning I have seen Joni dozens of times. She drove to wherever I was in eastern Iowa. And at every speech, her enthusiastic squeals of support energized both me and the audience. She is a hero to me.

One day, as my motorcade approached a rally in New Hampshire, I noticed that someone had gone way over the top in decorating his pickup truck. He had built a scaffolding of sorts in the back of his truck and had mounted enormous Romney posters on both sides of it. The rest of the truck was entirely decked out with my bumper stickers and flags and posters. There was a man standing next to it. He was tall and white haired; he smoked a pipe and wore Bermuda shorts and long white tube socks that came up to his knees.

A few days later when I was pulling into an event in Iowa, I saw the same truck. In fact, it

seemed that wherever I went, that truck was parked out front and that man in the white tube socks was standing next to it. That may not seem so unusual, but I was flying from place to place and he was driving.

This man, Jim Wilson, turned out to be seventy years old. By the midpoint of my 2012 campaign, he had attended 150 of my events and had logged 40,000 miles on his 1998 GMC pickup. On one of his long drives, some guys at a fuel stop gave him some lip about his support for me. He left, but shortly thereafter he looked in the bed of his truck and saw that his posters and scaffolding were on fire. Soon the entire truck was engulfed—and totaled.

Of course we decided to help Jim get another pickup truck—how could I possibly go to a rally without Jim Wilson and his truck at the entrance?

This October I was in Iowa again to campaign for a candidate who was running for U.S. Senate, and there was Jim Wilson. Kindly he presented me with a brand-new pair of white tube socks. Jim is also one of my heroes.

By the way, running for president was a family affair, and I'm not just talking about my immediate family. Cousins and in-laws Ann and I had not seen for decades showed up at events and volunteered hundreds of hours at campaign offices. One niece painted my portrait for a poster. My family members are my heroes.

America needs heroes. You don't have to be larger than life to be a hero, just larger than yourself. We see heroes every day—Scoutmasters, Primary teachers, missionaries, campaign volunteers, parents. I hope you will choose to be a hero, because this world needs a lot more of them.

### **Life Coach**

One of the best and worst things about a campaign is that you get a lot of advice. Usually several times a day someone in an audience would hand me a letter with their 100 percent

surefire way for me to win the election. I was told to take bigger steps when I walked to show that I am young and athletic. Another person said I should stop shaving for a few days to look more sexy. As if I needed that!

Of course, the best advice comes from the people closest to you. Having been a frequent speaker in church, I figured I didn't need a lot of advice on giving a speech. Wrong. Political speeches are different than church speeches. My dad, when he was the governor of Michigan, joked that he had once ended a campaign speech with "in the name of Jesus Christ, amen." My error wasn't that obvious, but my chief strategist helped me shorten my long stories, find applause lines, and slow down.

Advice from your spouse can be a tricky thing. Ann is my best advisor, but I also look uniquely to her for affirmation and support. She has perfected the art of first heaping on the praise and then ever so gently ladling on a word of advice, because when it comes to marriage, "reproving betimes with sharpness"<sup>4</sup> is not a good idea. It can lead to many lone and dreary nights.

Just like I did during the campaign, you need to have a life coach. You need someone who will tell you the truth, tell you that the perfect mate you have been looking for is no more perfect than you are, tell you when you are wrong, and tell you what you need to do to make things right.

I can assure you that finding someone who cares enough about you to tell you the truth and then is willing to take time to give you their counsel and their coaching is invaluable. Look for it.

### **Christ in the Foundation**

One of my fondest campaign memories is my trip to Israel. I had dinner at the home of an old Israeli friend whom I had come to know at my first job after business school at the Boston Consulting Group. At that time he called

himself Ben Natay because his real name was too difficult for some Americans to pronounce. Today we know him as Bibi Netanyahu, and he serves as Israel's prime minister.

I also had the opportunity there to address an audience in front of the historic Jerusalem city wall.

Ann and I stayed at the beautiful King David Hotel, opened in 1931. Our room had a breathtaking view of the Old City. As we were unpacking, Ann remarked with dismay that she had left her Bible at home. A few moments later there was a knock at our door, and an Israeli security guard handed her a Bible. Apparently, he was listening to everything said in our room. Again, "angels . . . are silent notes taking."<sup>5</sup>

Our son Josh, who had joined us on this trip, noted a large leather book that sat on the coffee table in our room. It was the guest book for the hotel, and it was signed by many of the dignitaries who had stayed there. We saw the signatures of Margaret Thatcher, Jimmy Carter, President Obama, Richard Nixon, George H. W. Bush, Tony Blair, and also Madonna and Bono. We were duly impressed.

The next day Ann and Josh went to see the garden tomb believed to be Jesus's final earthly

resting place. Of course His signature is not in the King David Hotel guest book. Unlike the hotel's famous guests, He was not only a visitor to Jerusalem, He was its very foundation.

We can never forget that we are His disciples. We may not hobnob with the famous, but in prayer we can speak with God every day.

I am so very thankful that I found The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It has informed who I am and to what my life has been devoted. It has provided the eternal ordinances of salvation and marriage. I love the Church. I love the members of the Church. I love the music of the Church. It is my witness to each of you that following its precepts and its prophets will bring incomparable happiness, now and forever. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. "Do What Is Right," *Hymns*, 2002, no. 237.
2. Jimmy Durante, "Make Someone Happy," on the album *Jimmy Durante's Way of Life . . .* (1965); originally from the musical *Do Re Mi* (1960), by Jule Styne, Betty Comden, and Adolph Green.
3. Matthew 5:16.
4. D&C 121:43.
5. "Do What Is Right."