

# *Preparing for Parenthood by Making Sense of My Past*

JAMES R. YOUNG

**G**ood morning, my brothers and sisters. I am grateful to share my thoughts and testimony with you and thank the administration for this special opportunity.

I have chosen to speak to you about the powerful influence of families on our lives. President Benson stated that

*because of our confidence in the perpetuity of the home and family into the eternities, we build our most elaborate and expensive structures—temples of God—so that man, woman, and their children may be bound together . . . in an everlasting union. . . . There is no other institution that can take the place of the family or fulfill its essential function. [TETB, p. 492]*

I am particularly sensitive to the power of family relations not only from my personal experiences in my own family, but also because of the many consequences of “familying” I am faced with professionally as I focus on helping children with special needs as well as serving as a marriage and family therapist.

My purpose this morning is to help motivate each of you to reflect once again on the influence your family has had on your life

and to have you consider more carefully what effect you will have on the family you create.

## **Preparation**

As I prepared for this presentation, I felt impressed not to preach at you or give you a “how-to” lecture. Rather, I felt impressed to bring to you some “lessons of life” your fellow students have experienced in their families.

One morning this spring a fellow colleague and I had a prayer and then went about the campus to find different students who would be willing to share their “stories” about their growing-up years. We wanted to get a representative sample of gender, age, and cultural backgrounds. Thirteen wonderful students volunteered to be interviewed and videotaped.

I asked them to respond to the following questions: What do you remember most about your home life? What were some of the lessons you learned from your family that influence

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you today? What kind of parent do you want to be?

They have allowed me to share with you this morning a sampling of their responses to these questions. Listen carefully to some of the lessons they have learned in their families.

### Some Lessons Learned

Margaret related a familiar, yet poignant, dilemma she faced as a young teenager.

*Well, when I was fourteen, I had an interesting experience with dating—or, I guess, not dating. I was in ninth grade, which was not in high school at the time. A guy that I liked was a sophomore in high school, which was sort of big-time, and he was also in my ward and I had had a crush on him forever. He asked me to go to this dance at the high school, and I was absolutely thrilled. This was my big chance, and I was just so thrilled at his invitation. So I went home to my parents, and they had known that I liked this guy and my dad really adores this person because he was in his priests quorum and was just really close with him. And so my parents were kind of in a dilemma because here I was fourteen, not old enough to date by the Church's standards, and yet they knew how important this would be to me and they also really liked him as a person.*

What would you expect her parents to do? What would you do as her parents? Margaret's parents decided not to let her go to the dance at that time in her life. Now, consider the effect of this decision on Margaret.

*I learned a couple of things from it. The first thing I learned was the importance of setting an example and my role in setting an example to my younger brothers and sisters. And, again, the other thing was always obeying the gospel principles no matter what type of peer pressure or what other things might be more appealing at the moment. When it comes down to it in the end, it's better to just stick with the principle.*

Listen to José and a powerful experience he had while growing up.

*This was when I was nine years old. I was in a Catholic elementary school. It was run by nuns. They were very, very strict, and I remember one day during recess that I was playing soccer in the yard and I kicked the ball and hit a window and broke the window. It was very scary at the time. One of the nuns came out and she yelled at me—she reprimanded me very harshly and told me to go home and tell my parents what had happened. I remember walking very, very slowly, scared, and trying not to get there. But I was very, very scared, and when I finally got there, my mom opened the door and I think she noticed how scared I was. I was pale and just looking terrible, and I told her what had happened, that I had kicked the ball and broken a window. I was just expecting her to do the same thing that the nun had done to me, just reprimand me.*

Note how José's mother reacted to him.

*But instead, she told me not to worry about it and she hugged me, and I felt a sense of relief and also of appreciation for having a mother that would understand and put her love for me above my mistakes.*

Many of you have had an experience like Ryan with the family car.

*One event that happened when I was sixteen I remember very well. I had had my driver's license for three or four months, so I snuck out my window, probably about midnight, took the car, went and picked up some of my buddies, and we just went cruising. We went and picked up some drinks at 7-Eleven and just went driving around the city—nothing major. And even though I know I shouldn't have been out that late, I did it anyways, cause you know when you're sixteen you don't really care. When I came back, however, dropped my friends off, and pulled into my neighborhood, I could see the*

*kitchen lights on in my house. I knew I was caught—I was busted. I was expecting to be grounded for three or four months from the car. That never happened.*

Again, note the effect his parents' response had on Ryan.

*They just talked to me like a normal person. They asked me, "Why did you want to go out?" And then, "Well, I understand. When I was sixteen, I wanted to go out and hang out with my friends—it's a cool thing to do." Then they asked me, "Do you realize that if you had been caught, you could have been busted for curfew?" They made me realize some things in a way that I hadn't really thought of before. And I respected them because they treated me just normal. They didn't talk down to me, they didn't lash out, they just connected with me.*

Other lessons learned by these students dealt with issues of self-perception, interacting with others, problem solving, and decision making. Leonard's father had a lasting influence in how Leonard approaches problems.

*He doesn't make any problem really sound big. Though it is big, he kind of narrows it down to something really small and he just comes up with one solution—and it works out really good. I just want to be like him. I want to be like my dad.*

Now see how Michelle's family influenced her self-esteem.

*When the decision was made for my family to move to California, my dad had the job offer. We came together, had a family council, decided if that would be best for our family, and it made me feel like I was a meaningful part of the family because my opinion was valued.*

As Bill and Brian thought of their families, they related the importance of parents being united.

*Bill: One of the things that I always saw, that probably most impressed me and built unity, was that I never remember my mother saying anything negative about my father—never—and I never saw him disrespect her—ever.*

*Brian: One thing that I learned about my parents is that when you want to teach your children the difference between right and wrong, you need to discuss it between yourselves first and how you're going to do that.*

Not all lessons learned in these students' families were positive. Moroni grew up in a family where his father did not treat his mother respectfully. Consequently, Moroni indicated the following:

*If I'm going to be a father and a husband, I just want to be the best. I think I'm going to love my wife so much, and probably because my mother didn't have this kind of relationship, I feel like I could probably be a good husband because I know what husbands shouldn't do.*

Eun-Suk was raised in circumstances that required both her parents to work and be out of the home for most of her younger years. She remembers a painful experience as a young girl. Following her school performances, it was the custom for parents to present the children with flowers. Her parents never attended any of her performances.

*My parents had never been there, so it was the worst in my experience. All the families came, and they gave flowers, but no one ever gave me flowers. It was the most painful experience. I don't want my children to have that kind of experience.*

So where did Eun-Suk learn to become such an outstanding woman? Where did she learn, as she puts it, her "best lessons"?

*I learned a lot of things from family and school, but learned the best things from Church. I honestly say that—in the Church.*

Brigham Young stated that

*it makes no difference how children are brought up so far as the permanence of the impressions and habits of childhood are concerned. Whether surrounded with error or truth, the web woven around them in childhood's days lasts, and seldom wears threadbare; . . . in many instances it grows brighter and brighter and stronger and stronger. [JD 13:243]*

### **Rituals and Traditions**

It was interesting to note how the patterns of interacting with each other, the family rituals and traditions, made a difference in many of these students' lives. As you watch a sampling of these family experiences, think about your own life and the power of family traditions and rituals.

Tammi and José related the importance of their families talking together at the dinner table and at family outings.

*Tammi: You have to do things together as a family a lot. It's so important to just have dinner, a meal, together as a family—just something like that, so simple—maybe that's the only time of the day that you can be together as a family, but I think that's very important. Growing up, the dinner table was the main place where we got together and talked.*

*José: My father always—during dinner or family trips or outings—engaged us in conversation on different subjects. I've realized lately that he was using the Socratic method. He would ask questions and try to elicit from us answers or help us come to the answers—reach the answers by ourselves rather than telling us.*

Judy and Tim also remember the importance of just spending time together as families.

*Judy: The most important thing in the family is to have fun together. You have fun together because you love each other, because you enjoy being together, because you're interested in each other's lives. I mean, when I think of my family, it's having fun together. Even when we were cleaning house, planting flowers, going to my grandma's house for the harvest to help her, we were always singing together, having fun even though the job was hard to do—because we worked together, you know, because we enjoyed being together and listening to each other's jokes, we enjoyed it. We were so happy.*

*Tim: We did everything together—on Christmas, Easter, and everything like that—you know, potlucks, where one person would cook and everybody would bring their own little special dish. We'd just get together like that.*

Having a special place to laugh together as a family was influential for Ryan.

*The one thing that my parents have done ever since we were little is they have taken us twice a year to Disneyland. I know that's just a vacation—it doesn't mean a lot to some people. But for my family Disneyland kind of represents a solid unity that my family has. It's very special to my family. You know, my family has a laughing place, and twice a year we go there and we bond.*

Listen to the effect of holding regular family home evenings and prayers on Margaret and Michelle.

*Margaret: Having family home evening was a really important ritual that we did that was able to pull us together and unify us as a family. We were able to think of ourselves as a unit instead of as ourselves in that type of situation. We would have family home evenings, and our family was a little bit different. We'd get into these, a lot of times, great discussions—intellectual discussions or debates—about different gospel subjects or even politics, or something like that, but it was a really good way for*

*everyone to participate and voice their opinion. We also studied the gospel in the family home evenings and sang our songs and said prayers. But I think just because we were able to talk amongst each other and listen to each other's ideas, we were able to understand each other much better.*

*Michelle: When I was young, we always had family prayer, and I remember feeling the Spirit.*

Bill's family had a tradition that all you future moms would love.

*I don't think I ever saw my mother do the dishes. You know, she cooked, and then our job was to do the dishes. And then every Sunday, my father would come in and he would help. The kids always handled the dishes, but Dad got in there, and, you know, we were happy to just pack stuff up and put it in the fridge and then dry stuff off as he cleaned it.*

### **Parent-Child Relationships**

In all the interviews, the relationships these students had with their parents became an important theme. How do you express love in your family? Is it easy to do so? Are you awkward in showing "it"?

*Bill: As a child, I can remember hearing that as he would tell me. But as I grew older, he didn't. I think we grew more into the traditional man role, and we didn't perhaps say it. I mean, it was still expressed. And now, once I got on my mission, then I started thinking that maybe we should just go ahead and say it. You know, we don't have to get all mushy and fall all over each other, but it's there. We agree and so try and just close off conversations like that.*

Note the special relationships some of the students have with their mothers.

*Michelle: She was always there. During high school we'd have lots of parties at our house, but it was always all the Church gang that was our age*

*getting together to have a good time. She was there almost like she was one of us, but she was still the chaperone; that's to say, she was part of it, like bringing us together and having fun with our friends.*

*Margaret: She understands the way that I think, and I can call her up anytime and relate different experiences I've had or problems I'm thinking about or just maybe questions I have about the gospel or just life in general. She always has a good answer, and it's always very much on my level.*

*Tim: I was real afraid of my mother because I'd seen the damage she could do and she's done it before, so you learn by example and experience. So, therefore, I didn't do the things that I knew not to do.*

With this healthy respect for his mother, Tim was quick to express how very much he loved his mother.

*Well, I love my mother dearly because she was there for me when my father wasn't. She's raising two kids—you know, myself and a younger brother. She still sends me money.*

Relationships with dads were also very meaningful and powerful for many of the students. Michelle knew that her father was always there for her, and Brian's dad showed a sense of humor.

*Michelle: He was always there for you—even if it was some stupid Young Women daddy-daughter party or a project at school that was going to be on display or a school program. He was always there, and you could always count on him being there.*

*Brian: And I think just having him at home, kind of creating a light atmosphere, a happy atmosphere, really helps out in the stressful times—and people like to be around him. And I want to be the kind of*

*father that people will feel relaxed and comfortable around.*

Leonard's father is a guide in his life.

*My dad became, like, my "star." When I drift off course I just set my eyes up on him and then I gain my course back.*

Contrast these relationships with Eun-Suk's relationship with her parents.

*I never have gone on a picnic with my mother, and, . . . I have never been somewhere with my parents.*

And yet, in spite of the poor relationship Eun-Suk had with her parents, listen to the compassion and understanding she has for her mother as she looks back on her younger years.

*I love my mother . . .*

### **Effect of Relationships**

Solid parent-child relationships produce many benefits, particularly when correction is required.

Remember Ryan taking the family car?  
Remember how his parents corrected him?

*They made me realize some things, you know, in a way that I hadn't really thought of before. And I respected them because they treated me just normal. They didn't talk down to me. They didn't lash out. They just connected with me.*

This was effective for Ryan because his parents had taken the time to bond with him. His parents had made solid deposits in the "emotional bank" from which to draw on.

How could Judy's mom simply give that "look" and get Judy to do the correct thing? Was the "look" a threat of wrath coming down? Or was it something else?

*Just a look and I know I have disappointed her. She is the person that I love the most in this world. She never would hit me or anything, but she would just look at me, and I knew in her eyes that she had been disappointed by me.*

Note the effects of Michelle's parents using teaching as their main means of disciplining.

*My parents were never ones to ground us. They let us know that they were disappointed in the choices that we had made and tried to help us recognize our mistakes and not do it again. It mattered if my parents were disappointed in the choices I made because I loved them and they showed that they loved me. I didn't want to do anything that would hurt them—nothing.*

Neal Maxwell has indicated that "what we learn in the home with regard to our capacity to love, to cope with change, and to be fair and genial affects us profoundly for the balance of our lives" (Neal A. Maxwell, *That My Family Should Partake* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1974], p. 13).

### **Extended Family**

Families, of course, mean more than just the nuclear family of parents and children. Several of these students spoke of the influence of their extended families. Leonard and Todd recalled how their grandparents influenced their parents' approaches to family management.

*Leonard: He was always making references to my grandparents. Every time he says, "You know, when I was your age, your granddad wouldn't let me do this."*

*Todd: How my mom grew up and was raised by my grandparents is evident in how she raised me. She took their values and put them into her life to lead me down the road that she knew was the right one; she was able to help me from how they helped her.*

When Judy recalls her growing-up years, she thinks of aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins who lived close by and regularly influenced her.

*When I talk about my family, I'm not talking about my mom, my father, and my brothers and sisters. I talk about my grandma, my cousins, and everybody, because we're very close. You know, when my mom was not able to do my hair to go to school, I went over to my grandma's and she did it for me. And then my cousins are like my sisters and my brothers to me. We're just a big family together.*

Joseph F. Smith admonished that

*we should begin to realize that every man and woman is an agent, and exercises a certain amount of influence in the sphere in which he or she moves. Parents have an influence over their children; children have an influence over each other; neighbor has an influence with neighbor. [JD 13:339]*

Tim remembers how it was more than just Mom who disciplined and taught him.

*When interacting with my grandparents, I learned that they weren't no joke. What they say goes, and we had to obey by those rules. And they were more than just my grandparents—it was more like a family thing: mother, auntie, uncles.*

### **Future Parenting**

The last question regarding the kind of parents these students wanted to become provided quite varied and interesting responses. Two of the students indicated how the expression of love will be an important part of their future families.

*Ryan: As a parent, I want to develop the quality of unconditional love. I have seen that so much in my family and how that has helped with situations. Instead of flying off the handle sometimes when*

*they could have, my parents just showed unconditional love and understanding.*

*Brian: I think the most important thing I learned from my family is that there needs to be love between us, no matter what happens.*

Some of their ideas showed how they intend to relate with their future children.

*Eun-Suk: I'm going to give my children a lot of love. I'm going to show them my love all the time.*

*Ryan: I hope that I will be able to come up to my teenager and say, "Look, I was a teenager. I understand." I hope I can remember being a teenager.*

*Brian: I want them to be able to come to me with questions and challenges that they face with their peers, with anybody. I want them to feel like they can talk to me and accept my input.*

*Tammi: When I'm a mom, I hope to be able to stay home with my children. I definitely want to graduate from college and have that, because you never know what can happen, but I think it's so important to be there with your kids when they are young and growing up. I want a husband that wants to spend time with the kids, wants to go to their football games, basketball games, whatever. Growing up, my parents were very supportive of the children. They went to everything. I don't think my parents missed a single event in my life. I want to do that with my husband. I want to go, as a couple, to basketball games, to their plays, or whatever.*

How do these prospective parents intend to discipline their future families?

*Bill: I think of some of the things that I'm going to do as a father—my wife and I were just talking about this actually. We have sat down and had some of the discipline talks and those things that are important. I believe 100% in establishing boundaries. I think that children need to*

*understand. Individuals need to understand where they can operate.*

*Tammi: The essentials of good parenting are that the parents get along and that they don't argue in front of the children at all and that they don't clash on their methods—like if they're punishing a child. They shouldn't conflict about the punishment.*

A sample of other important parenting variables included financial stability, remaining together as parents, and being a righteous partner.

*Tim: When I want to deal with my family, I think I will want to be old enough so that I can make the right decisions—you know, be financially stable and everything so that I can provide for my family and everything.*

*Todd: Having experienced a division in my family between the parents and their roles in raising me has helped me realize how important it is to be a family unit, to have both of them there for the support, for the responsibilities—to not divide up.*

*Eun-Suk: I want my husband to treat my children as his friends. I'm going to be my children's friend, so he has to be. If he is a righteous man, I don't need to ask that. He's going to do that. We can do that. We can make a real nice and wonderful family.*

Because of the positive influence of Leonard's father on his life, he wants to pattern his parenting after his father's example. This example included early morning scripture reading and prayer, putting education as a high priority for all the children, respecting your elders, and having a sense of belonging to a caring and involved extended family.

*When I become a parent, I'll want to be just like my dad. I just want to be like him. I want to be like my dad.*

George Q. Cannon indicated that

*there is one thing that every parent can do. He can endeavor to make his sons and daughters better qualified, better equipped for the great struggle of life and better able to perform their part in this glorious work that God has established, than himself; that is one thing the parents of the rising generation . . . can do. [JD 20:197]*

*Bill: First and foremost is living lives in accordance with the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

### Conclusion

In conclusion, let me share two summary thoughts about families provided by two of our modern-day prophets.

First, listen to the words of Neal A. Maxwell:

*So often in human affairs, individuals and groups have been guilty of "looking beyond the mark"—of looking at, or for, something that was neither a realistic hope nor a solution for their problems. Such defective farsightedness neglected the remedy that is nearer at hand all the time. . . . It is so with the family today, for looking beyond the family to other institutions, programs, or activities—which may be good and helpful in their spheres—can be disastrous. . . .*

*. . . The human family is potentially much more efficient in producing the social and spiritual outcomes we desire than are our political, educational, economic, and other institutions. . . . It is the home we must rescue and sustain. [Neal A. Maxwell, *That My Family Should Partake*, p. 7]*

And finally, I would like to close with a familiar statement given by our beloved prophet David O. McKay.

*The home is the first and most effective place for children to learn the lessons of life: truth, honor, virtue, self-control; the value of education, honest work, and the purpose and privilege of life. Nothing*



*can take the place of home in rearing and teaching children, and no other success can compensate for failure in the home.* [David O. McKay, *Family Home Evening Manual*, 1968–69 (Salt Lake City: Corporation of the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1968), p. iii]

May each of us carefully make sense of our lives and take the good from our past and rise to the sacred task of making the future even brighter for our children is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.