

In the Line of Service

KENT W. COLTON

Gerald Horton Bath told the experience of a small African boy who

listened carefully as the teacher explained why it is that Christians give presents to each other on Christmas day. “The gift is an expression of our joy over the birth of Jesus and our friendship for each other,” she said.

When Christmas day came, the boy brought to the teacher a sea shell of lustrous beauty. “Where did you ever find such a beautiful shell?” the teacher asked as she gently fingered the gift.

The youth told her that there was only one spot where such extraordinary shells could be found. When he named the place, a certain bay several miles away, the teacher was left speechless.

“Why . . . why, it’s gorgeous . . . wonderful, but you shouldn’t have gone all that way to get a gift for me.”

*His eyes brightening, the boy answered, “Long walk part of gift.” [Gerald Horton Bath, “Long Walk Part of Gift,” in *The Greatest Christmas Ever: A Treasury of Inspirational Ideas and Insights for an Unforgettable Christmas* [Tulsa, Oklahoma: Honor Books, 1995, 69]*

During our path of life “the long walk”—the opportunity for charitable love and service—is often the most important part of the gift. In fact,

the most important gifts are usually not the ones that cost the most but the ones that come from the heart and reflect true love in the line of service.

When Christ was preparing for His ultimate sacrifice and His crowning achievement, He told His disciples:

A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you. . . .

By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. [John 13:34–35]

After a long life of service, King Benjamin shared the wisdom of his experience:

And behold, I tell you these things that ye may learn wisdom; that ye may learn that when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God.

Behold, ye have called me your king; and if I, whom ye call your king, do labor to serve you, then ought not ye to labor to serve one another? [Mosiah 2:17–18]

Kent W. Colton was senior scholar at the Harvard University Joint Center for Housing Studies when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 9 April 2002.

But there is a counter side to this line of thinking. It is all around us. We are bombarded by it on television, in the magazines we read, and in the natural man found within. The counter side is the “me generation.” In the decade of the 1990s more wealth was generated in the United States than in any other time in the history of our nation. More millionaires and billionaires were spawned than ever before, and the focus turned to worldly possessions and conspicuous consumption.

During the 1990s I worked with the home-building industry. Home building boomed in the latter part of the 1990s, and the economy experienced the longest economic upturn in its recorded history. Although the median square footage of houses has grown significantly over time, the average size of households living in those houses actually dropped in the 1990s. Big houses, fancy cars, and new televisions, VCRs, and DVDs abound. *Lifestyle* became the buzzword of the marketing profession. More women than ever were in the workplace—a phenomenon that was perhaps one of the most significant societal changes to take place in the United States in the last 30 years of the century. But because of the focus on worldly wealth, for many families it now takes two incomes to maintain—or at least come close to—a middle-class lifestyle. Long hours and a focus on possessions characterized the decade of the 1990s.

Now don’t get me wrong—I am not saying that you shouldn’t “love yourself” in a positive sense. You need to know who you are, and you need to make sure that you are at one with yourself and that you are physically, emotionally, spiritually, and educationally strong and prepared. Furthermore, particularly for the single students, you have the opportunity to be—at least in part—“self-oriented” in a positive way to make sure that you are doing the things you need to do to prepare for the future. It is important to love yourself, but it is equally important to balance this with an outward focus.

My parents have told me that as a little boy I would often say “Self, self” as an indication that I wanted to do it myself. It is important to be independent to a point, but I have learned that I can do far better with the help of the Lord and the service of my fellowmen.

September 11th—How Did it Change Our World?

On September 11, 2001, as we were attacked by terrorist forces, the roaring spirit of the ‘90s was brought to a devastating halt. As a society we were in shock. We cannot change what happened, but there is much to learn.

When President Hinckley spoke on Sunday morning, October 7, 2001, at general conference, he helped put our lives in perspective:

Through centuries of time, men and women, so very, very many, have lived and died. Some may die in the conflict that lies ahead. To us, and we bear solemn testimony of this, death will not be the end. There is life beyond this as surely as there is life here. Through the great plan which became the very essence of the War in Heaven, men shall go on living. [Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Times in Which We Live,” *Ensign*, November 2001, 74]

He then focused eloquently on how we should live:

Are these perilous times? They are. But there is no need to fear. We can have peace in our hearts and peace in our homes. We can be an influence for good in this world, every one of us. [“The Times,” 74]

The question then is: What kind of an influence for good do you want to be?

George W. Romney—Shirtsleeve Public Servant

Let me share an example of a person who knew what it meant to be in the line of service.

When George W. Romney died on 26 July 1995, newspapers in Michigan and across the nation eulogized him as one of the most genuine public servants of our time. . . .

“Romney embodied the Mormon belief that we are all literally brothers and sisters on earth, that service to each other is essential. . . . [He believed] we have to be helping and fair with each other” (The Detroit News and Free Press, 28 July 1995). [In *George W. Romney: Shirtsleeve Public Servant*, Romney Institute of Public Management, Marriott School, Brigham Young University, 2002, 2]

Yes, George Romney was a very successful businessman, and through hard work and creativity he led American Motors from disaster to stunning success. “By 1959, George had become the most famous businessman in the world, and he went on to become the Associated Press ‘Man of the Year in Industry’ four years in a row” (*Shirtsleeve Public Servant*, 9). But throughout the time of his business success he was constantly involved as an active citizen and contributor to his community. In December 1956, despite the significant challenges at American Motors, he agreed to chair the Citizens Advisory Committee on School Needs in Detroit. And his work soon earned him the nickname Spokesman for a Better Detroit.

Later, in 1959, when the state of Michigan faced a seemingly insoluble financial crisis, George argued that the problem could only be resolved with the enactment of a new state constitution. He subsequently formed Citizens for Michigan, a nonpartisan citizens’ group . . . designed to give the Michigan state government the kind of total makeover that [was required.]

. . . On 10 February 1962, after a day of contemplation and prayer, George announced his candidacy for the governor’s office.

[Eventually he was elected, and] *during George’s three terms as governor, he was able to*

wipe out Michigan’s deficit, dramatically increase conservation efforts, improve school funding, and streamline government.

. . . When Richard Nixon won the presidency [in 1968], he invited George to be his Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). George accepted. [Shirtsleeve Public Servant, 11, 14]

He resigned in 1972, and after his retirement from nearly 40 years of public service, George Romney with true missionary zeal spent the next 23 years—the rest of his life—helping to gather and direct the growing movement for volunteer service in the nation.

Let me share with you what he said when he spoke on February 20, 1970, at the first meeting of the National Center for Voluntary Action—a board he would chair for more than five years:

Americans have four basic ways of solving problems that are too big for individuals to handle by themselves. One is through the federal government. A second is through state governments and the local governments that the states create. The third is through the private sector—the economic sector that includes business, agriculture, and labor. The fourth method is the independent sector—the voluntary, cooperative action of free individuals and independent association. Voluntary action is the most powerful of these, because it is uniquely capable of stirring the people themselves and involving their enthusiastic energies. . . . As Woodrow Wilson said, “The most powerful force on earth is the spontaneous cooperation of a free people.” Individualism makes cooperation worthwhile—but cooperation makes freedom possible. [Shirtsleeve Public Servant, 16]

Mitt Romney said it well in speaking of his father:

[My father believed America would be saved] *by men and women who work in their communities to lift one another; who encourage, lead, support,*

and help Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts; and who volunteer their talents to help people who are less advantaged. That is the only course that brings people back to the greatness that has always been part of America. That's what he'd tell you. And . . . he devoted his life to preaching that message. ["George Romney: A Citizen First," *Exchange*, fall 1996, 28]

And it is certainly fair to say that Mitt has followed in his father's footsteps in the line of service with his great effort in the Olympics. And the service in this state related to the Winter Olympics that was rendered by so very many people—including, I'm sure, many of you—has been a great example of the importance and benefits of volunteer service.

My wife and I came to Utah for some meetings the week after the Olympics, and it was our humble observation that the Olympics had brought the state together. The opportunity for many to volunteer—and the success that comes from service—had yielded a sense of community for the state and for the nation. When done in the right spirit, service fosters unity, oneness, and commitment.

President John F. Kennedy said it well:

For of those to whom much is given, much is required. And when at some future date the high court of history sits in judgment on each of us, recording whether in our brief span of service we fulfilled our responsibilities to the state, our success or failure, in whatever office we hold, will be measured by the answers to four questions: First, were we truly men of courage. . . . Second, were we truly men of judgment. . . . Third, were we truly men of integrity. . . . Finally, were we truly men of dedication? [John F. Kennedy, speech to the Massachusetts state legislature (9 January 1961)]

In his State of the Union speech on January 29, 2002, President George W. Bush set forth a challenge to every American:

In the sacrifice of soldiers, the fierce brotherhood of firefighters, and the bravery and generosity of ordinary citizens, we have glimpsed what a new culture of responsibility could look like. We want to be a nation that serves goals larger than self. We've been offered a unique opportunity, and we must not let this moment pass. [At whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html]

He offered a specific challenge to all of us: "My call tonight is for every American to commit at least two years—4,000 hours over the rest of your lifetime—to the service of your neighbors and your nation" (at whitehouse.gov).

Two years—that has a familiar sound to it, doesn't it?

What Does It Mean, Then, for All of Us to Be in the Line of Service?

Being in the line of service can include a career in public service, involvement in a family project, or individual acts of charity. In essence it is showing, on a regular basis, our love for those around us and the pure love of Jesus Christ. It is loving one another as our Savior loved us.

I am delighted to be on campus as a Romney lecturer for the George W. Romney Institute of Public Management in the School of Management. This is not intended to be a commercial, but it is worth noting that the Romney Institute trains people who will receive master's degrees in public administration and who will spend their life in public service. I have an MPA, and it is a great degree that has allowed me to work in a variety of different capacities—many related to public service and public policy. People trained at the Romney Institute serve as city managers, state government officials, health care professionals, federal workers, leaders of nonprofit organizations, consultants, and change agents working in the United States and international countries with nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations.

These jobs are just a few examples of a host of careers in public service, and, as you can see, the options are rich and varied.

And what about family service? The opportunities abound. In December 1999 our family had a unique experience. Between Christmas and New Year's we were able to go to Belfast in northern Ireland to work on a house for Habitat for Humanity. It was a different kind of Christmas for us, but the privilege to be together and to work with both Catholic and Protestant families to help build Habitat houses was a unique opportunity. We saw how providing decent, safe, affordable housing could bridge the gap between different people and cultures, and it provided a common bond for our family through service and love. It was a Christmas we will never forget.

And, speaking of Christmas, I am reminded of one of my favorite Christmas stories that illustrates the importance of individual acts of charity in the line of service. I heard it years ago, and although I am not sure of the source or even if it is a factual story, the point is clear.

It was just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. It has peeked through the branches of our tree for the past 10 years or so. It began because my husband Mike strongly disliked the commercial aspects of Christmas—the frantic running around at the last minute and the focus on gifts instead of people and our Savior. Knowing he felt this way, I reached for something special. The inspiration came in an unusual way. Our son Kevin, who was 12 that year, was wrestling at the junior level. Shortly before Christmas there was a nonleague match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church. These youngsters didn't have headgear, and they dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, and they were a sharp contrast

to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes.

We took every weight class. Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly. "I wish just one of them could have won," he said. "They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them."

Mike loved kids—all kids—having coached Little League football, baseball, and lacrosse. That's when the idea for his present came. That afternoon I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve I placed the envelope on the tree with a note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me.

His smile was the brightest that year, and in succeeding years. For each Christmas I followed the tradition—one year sending a group of mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas, and on and on. The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning, and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents. As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure.

The story doesn't end there. You see, we lost Mike last year due to cancer. When Christmas rolled around I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning it was joined by three more. Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition has grown and someday will expand even further with our grandchildren standing around the tree with wide-eyed anticipation watching as their fathers take down the envelope. Mike's spirit, like the Christmas spirit, will always be with us.

But It's Not Always Easy to Be in the Line of Service

I hope that I have made the case for being in the line of service. We have noted some inspiring examples. But I also want to be realistic. Service is great, but I caution you: It cannot wait for the convenient moment. You need to be proactive. If you wait for the convenient moment to serve, it will never happen! Sacrifice is what makes it service.

If we are really going to learn to serve, it must become a way of life as it was for George Romney and many other people we know. It must become part of our everyday actions. You can make it your profession, but if it's not your profession, you can still make it an important part of your life.

The Savior is our ultimate example. He lived a life of service, and, indeed, He sacrificed His life so that we might live again. He did not spend His life with the rich and famous or seeking worldly possessions; He spent His life healing the sick and teaching His disciples. His admonition to us was: "This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

Remember, this is the time for you to prepare. The sign at the entrance to campus has never been more meaningful: "Enter to Learn; Go Forth to Serve." You are students at the university sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This is your time to prepare, and the education you receive now will help you to be ready to serve throughout the remainder of your life. One of the best ways you can prepare to "go forth to serve" is to be of service while you are here. Guard this time well. Don't waste your time. Prepare for the future. The opportunities lie before you, and the moment is now. Seize the moment.

In the Line of Service: A Model for Life

We talk often in the business world about the importance of profit and bottom-line

financial success. Returns on investment and maximizing shareholder equity often drive decision making. I believe in the free enterprise system and the importance of providing for family and financial reserves. However, King Benjamin's words provide a different model of success. He taught us the importance of starting with a clear destination in mind: "When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God" (Mosiah 2:17). The destination is our return to the presence of our Father in Heaven, and the path is through service, charity, and the pure love of Christ.

We all know Albert Einstein and the powerful scientific contributions he made that have influenced our way of life. Listen to his words as they set forth a related model of success:

*Strange is our situation here upon earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to a divine purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: that man is here for the sake of other men. . . . Many times a day I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labors of my fellow-men, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received. [Albert Einstein, in *Living Philosophies* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1930); see also Einstein, *The World As I See It*, translated by Alan Harris]*

The process of giving back through service and other means is an expression not only of service but of gratitude.

Moroni was a great prophet. In the last days of his mortal life he was forced to see the devastation of his people. Despite the destruction and excesses that were all around him, he provided powerful insights into the blessings that come from practicing service, charity, and the pure love of Christ.

He outlined a clear vision and destination for life:

But charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him.

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may become the sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall

be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure. Amen. [Moroni 7:47–48]

May we seek to practice this pure love of Christ with the hope that we may become the sons and daughters of God, to be like Him and see Him as He is. May we always be in the line of service, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.