

# *“And They Did Fellowship One with Another”*

NEAL LAVAUN COX

**A**s a preface to my remarks today, I wish to declare my faith and testimony. I know that there is a God in heaven. He is our Heavenly Father, and He loves all of His children. He has revealed Himself to the world in these the latter days, and prophets walk the earth today as they did anciently.

*God loved us, so he sent his Son,  
Christ Jesus, the atoning One,  
To show us by the path he trod  
The one and only way to God.*  
[“God Loved Us, So He Sent His Son,” *Hymns*,  
2002, no. 187]

I rejoice with you today in this good news and in this truth.

## **“Lonely in the Midst of a Million”**

During the past several years my wife, Carol, and I have been fortunate to live with you here in “Happy Valley.” I consider this a great blessing for us and our family. But I have discovered that even in Happy Valley there are some among us who are not happy and who yearn for recognition and friendship. I find this odd because we live in an environment of relative tranquility and abundance. During an

earlier era of peace and plenty described in the Book of Mormon, it was noted: “And they did fellowship one with another, and did rejoice one with another, and did have great joy” (Helaman 6:3). As we fellowship or befriend others, we can also rejoice with them and have great joy.

I have seen this outcome in many of your lives, but not all. There are lonely people among us, and today I share your concern for such souls. Perhaps you are among the lonely. Surely some of those within your reach sense the emptiness of feeling alone in the world. Moroni had such feelings when he wrote, “I am alone . . . , and I have not friends” (Mormon 8:5). But his world was devoid of Saints. In Provo we are surrounded!

In 1867 Mark Twain visited New York City and reported the following: “[New York] is a splendid desert—a domed and steepled solitude, where the stranger is lonely in the midst of a million of his race” (“Letter from ‘Mark Twain,’” *San Francisco Daily Alta California*,

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11 August 1867, 1). How sad that lonely souls walked the same streets as thousands of other lonely persons—their potential friends. This is contrary to the way God would have us live. He desires that we be “no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens” (Ephesians 2:19).

Today there are still lonely people in New York City as well as throughout the world. Listen to a sampling of their voices:

*“I always feel lonely and have no friends.”*

*“I’m not important to anyone. I’m forgettable. I’m boring.”*

*“I am so lonely. . . . Please just talk to me.”*  
[“I Am Lonely,” [experienceproject.com](http://experienceproject.com)]

Or consider the words of a woman who recently visited a beautiful park. Excited to make new friends that day, she noted:

*I passed at least 20 adults, some with children, some with dogs on leashes. The dogs appeared to be excited, tails wagging, stopping to take a sniff at anyone who acknowledged them. . . .*

*. . . No one smiles, no one can say hi, and if you try to say hi to them, they turn their heads. . . . Maybe some owners could learn a lesson or two from their furry companions.*

The park visitor concluded, “If you don’t extend your hand out to others, there won’t be anyone to miss you when you are gone” (LifebyLisa, “Short Stories: Loneliness,” 10 August 2007, [beyondprose.com/index.php/short-stories-loneliness-33-287448](http://beyondprose.com/index.php/short-stories-loneliness-33-287448)).

Let me briefly add a personal disclaimer. Today’s advice is not intended to encourage anyone to disregard common sense when dealing with others. Certainly there are rare situations that necessitate avoiding people. Scripture warns, “Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away” (Proverbs 4:14–15). However, to personally extend this biblical warning unnecessarily to multitudes

of well-meaning but lonely people is to forfeit opportunities to bless lives—yours included.

### **Get Outside Yourself**

Not long ago a sophomore at BYU found her way to my office. Her demeanor and body language bespoke her sadness, and she lamented that she had failed to become involved or make many friends during her first year in Provo. I mostly listened as she conducted a personal therapy session with herself and as she concluded, saying, “I guess I just need to get outside myself and do something for others.” She had made a very wise and absolutely correct diagnosis of the malady from which she was suffering, and I knew I could help.

I immediately walked the young woman to the Student Leadership office, which houses the programs of the Brigham Young University Student Service Association, or BYUSA as it is better known. There she was introduced to a genuinely happy and gregarious student volunteer who took her on a tour of the office, explaining the various ways in which students may become involved and serve others. I left knowing that my young friend was in good hands. She was doing what she herself had prescribed. She was getting outside herself and finding ways to serve others.

A few days after our visit to the Student Leadership office, I returned to communicate thanks to the dedicated student volunteer who had fellowshiped my friend. The volunteer said, with excitement in her voice, “Your friend is here in the office this afternoon.”

“Where?” I questioned.

“Over there.” She pointed to a spot perhaps fifty feet from where we stood. I quickly made my way to see my once lonely and unhappy friend but opted to stay out of sight while within range of her voice. My friend had gotten involved and was giving a tour of the office to two freshmen.

I heard her say, “I didn’t get involved but kept to myself during my freshman year, and

I regret it. You need to get outside yourself and find a way to serve. We can help you!" This was music to my ears, and when I made my appearance I observed the smile that had replaced the previous distressed look on my friend's face. Similar excited and happy looks were observed on the faces of the two visitors. I had just witnessed modern fulfillment of the important Book of Mormon parallel: "And they did fellowship one with another, and did rejoice one with another, and did have great joy."

Professor Richard J. Light, in his groundbreaking research regarding college students, observed, "Students report that their most powerful memories come from incidents and experiences outside of classes, usually during interactions with fellow students" (*Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* [Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001], 210). I would add that campus clubs, the Y-Serve office, and Student Leadership programs at BYU are wonderful ways to find service opportunities and thus have positive interactions with other students. If you feel such a need, these programs beckon you! Please find a way to contribute and get outside yourself. If you are concerned that involvement may adversely impact your academics, Dr. Light concluded, "On average, students who do volunteer work have slightly higher grades than those who don't" (*Making the Most of College*, 29).

President Thomas S. Monson visited the BYU campus in 2007. He observed that day:

*To find real happiness, we must seek for it in a focus outside ourselves. No one has learned the meaning of living until he has surrendered his ego to the service of his fellow man. Service to others is akin to duty—the fulfillment of which brings true joy. ["Guideposts for Life's Journey," BYU devotional address, 13 November 2007]*

I testify that this is true and rejoice in the many students who have discovered this

emancipating principle of the gospel of Jesus Christ. President Monson also observed, "The New Testament teaches that it is impossible to take a right attitude toward Christ without taking an unselfish attitude toward men" ("Guideposts"). President Monson's encouragement and his personal example are echoes of a principle taught in the Book of Mormon: "Think of your brethren like unto yourselves, and be familiar with all" (Jacob 2:17).

### **Have Courage to Approach Others**

Sister Cox and I were blessed to be able to serve the people of the Illinois Chicago Mission. It was a challenging but beautifully enlarging experience for our family. One of the things about which we felt strongly was the importance of quickly introducing new missionaries to the people of the Windy City. When missionaries first arrived, we did not attempt to insulate them from others. We wanted them to immediately meet people who would profit from knowing about the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. This is our mission!

As new missionaries arrived at O'Hare Airport, it was our practice to board the "L" train with them for a forty-five-minute ride into the city. Armed with copies of the Book of Mormon and referral cards, our objective was to provide every new missionary a positive experience in sharing the gospel with someone along the way. A few seasoned missionaries accompanied us in order to provide good role models and mentors for the sincere but inexperienced elders and sisters. I loved those days, but I am not sure all of the new missionaries did!

Having been raised by loving mothers and fathers who had taught them to never speak to strangers, it must have seemed odd when we directed the new missionaries to speak with every stranger they could as they rode the train into the city. Many responded and greeted people on the train while others initially found it difficult to communicate with strangers.

I recall one wonderful sister who, upon her arrival, seemed frozen with fear as she contemplated how she might make a positive contact during her first day as a missionary in the field. Unable to muster the significant courage needed to initiate a conversation with others, she observed a group of young people boarding the train. They were touring the city and sharing their Christian beliefs through music. Thanks to the other missionaries, there was ample conversation about our faith on the train car, and the members of the Christian youth group were exposed to the Book of Mormon by enthusiastic elders and sisters. There was so much discussion, in fact, that we actually missed our intended stop, riding the train until we reached the line's terminus.

As this kind group of Christian youth and their pastor exited the train, the young sister missionary was gathering her things, not yet having had a chance to speak about her faith. One of the female members of the departing Christian youth group lagged behind her peers and quietly returned to the train car to ask the determined but somewhat frustrated sister missionary, "Could I get a copy of that book?" The sister missionary wasted no time in delivering a copy of the Book of Mormon before briefly bearing her humble testimony of its veracity. I don't think that this sister's feet touched the ground for hours after her positive interaction with a stranger. Her prayers—and ours—were answered.

Thinking about this young sister missionary brings back memories of my first few days as a young elder. Serving in Tokyo, Japan, with no previous language training, I participated many mornings in a flyer distribution activity at the Nishi Koiwa train station. As men hustled to board their train to go to work early each morning, we politely approached them and offered a small flyer detailing the location of our church and providing a brief spiritual message. As the men rapidly passed by, I learned to say, "Dozo, yonde kudasai," or

"Please read this." After a few days of repeating the same simple directive, I asked my companion, Elder Kent McKell, if there might be another phrase I could use. He told me to say, "Dozo, o yomi ni natte kudasai," which means the same thing (please read this) but in honorific language. I proceeded to use the newly discovered expression but unfortunately failed to pronounce one syllable correctly. That morning I repeated, perhaps 200 times, to busy Japanese businessmen, "Dozo, oyome ni natte kudasai," or "Please marry me" (literally, please become my bride). Yes, we risk failure or embarrassment when we approach others, but it is the right thing to do!

I am grateful today for a Church member who got outside himself and talked to a stranger. The stranger was my great-great-grandfather Orville Sutherland Cox, who was relocating from Ohio to Missouri. My ancestor was not well acquainted with the restored gospel of Jesus Christ when he met Brother Sylvester Hulet on a dusty road just outside Far West, Missouri, in 1838. Brother Hulet patiently listened as Mr. Cox harshly criticized the Church based solely on rumors to which he had been exposed. Rather than bristling and walking away, Brother Hulet invited my ancestor to walk with him into the city and witness, firsthand, the industry and goodness of the Mormons. My ancestor was impressed and quickly recognized the false nature of his previous impressions. Learning that Mr. Cox was a newcomer and had no place to stay, Brother Hulet kindly opened his home to this stranger for an extended period. For me this adds much personal meaning to the Savior's declaration "I was a stranger, and ye took me in" (Matthew 25:35).

That one encounter altered the entire course of my great-great-grandfather's life and the lives of his descendants. I am a grateful recipient of Brother Sylvester Hulet's kind fellowship that day so long ago. After some time Orville Cox was baptized, and the two men

eventually migrated to Utah and remained faithful Latter-day Saints and best friends to the end of their lives. It is only fitting that Orville Sutherland Cox and Sylvester Hulet, who met as strangers on a road in Missouri, are buried next to each other in the pioneer cemetery in Fairview, Utah. What if Brother Hulet would have avoided my ancestor that day? It is quite possible that we would not be having this conversation 175 years later!

### **Show Genuine Interest: Three Examples**

All of us are looking forward to general conference this coming weekend, and we see genuine interest in others powerfully exemplified in the lives of our Church leaders. While I am not well acquainted with the Brethren and regard myself as a very ordinary but grateful Church member, I have had occasion to personally witness the determined efforts of Church leaders to get outside themselves and recognize others.

Years ago as a missionary I looked forward to a visit of the relatively young apostle Elder Gordon B. Hinckley. He was deeply revered by the Japanese Saints and had been highly involved in the growth of the Church in post-World War II Japan. He loved all people but seemed to have a special affinity for those in this once war-torn nation.

Elder Hinckley arrived late one evening, very tired and suffering from jet lag. The following day he faced a rigorous schedule, which included much travel and several teaching opportunities. As he arose very early the next morning, he had every reason to seek privacy as he prepared for the day, but that was not what he chose to do. Elder Hinckley asked the first missionaries he encountered that morning—Elders Evans and Cox—if they would accompany him into the streets of Tokyo, where he desired to communicate with the good people of that city. Although he spoke a surprising amount of Japanese, he felt that the two missionaries might be of some value

in helping him communicate with those he would meet that morning. We spent the next hour contacting people on the streets of Tokyo, recognizing them and their individual worth and informing them of our faith. President Hinckley loved all people and sought to serve them throughout his long life. He did not avoid others!

On another occasion I visited a Salt Lake clinic seeking remedy for a knee injury. When my name was called, I was ushered down a busy hallway by a helpful nurse. While moving toward our destination, we passed an exam room with an open door. Seated on the exam table, dressed in a hospital gown, was President Spencer W. Kimball, who was also receiving medical attention that day. I was shocked to see the prophet but inspired when he quickly recognized my presence and waved a kind greeting to a man he had never met but one he seemed to value. Such is the manner in which true disciples of Christ live.

You perhaps have noticed, as I have, how prone to warmth and welcoming our university president is. When I visited campus in fall 2007 to be interviewed for the position I was later blessed to assume, I was walking alone from the Abraham Smoot Building to the Wilkinson Student Center when President Cecil O. Samuelson, accompanied by a few of his colleagues, greeted me while walking in the opposite direction. He was one of very few who seemed to recognize me that day. Why did he notice me? He did not know me, and I was not affiliated with the university at the time. He had nothing to gain from his brief but genial exchange with me. He simply cares about others in a manner not unlike the Savior, who issues a sincere greeting and invitation to all mankind: “My hands are stretched out still” (see Isaiah 9:12, 17, 21).

### **Look for Ways to Be with Others**

So why is it so difficult for us to talk to others we don't yet know? Perhaps it is because



not everyone returns the same enthusiastic greeting we try to extend. The actions of many bespeak their apparent belief that eye contact has been outlawed in Provo. Others hide behind an electronic shield, a hindrance to potential contact that would enhance their lives and bring blessings to themselves and others. Too many on our campus spend time inspecting the sidewalks rather than looking up to find the potential friends who surround them. Some of us leave behind the strong focus on the welfare of others we practiced as missionaries. This campus should be the warmest and most inviting on earth!

You have likely felt both the exhilaration of being recognized as well as the heartache that accompanies being ignored. Let us choose to recognize others on the campus of Brigham Young University. Let us follow the counsel given by outstanding student leaders who, sensing the need I speak of today, produced a brief video in 2008 that is timeless and worth our viewing this morning (see *Redefine Service*, BYUSA video, [byusa.byu.edu/service/redefine-service](http://byusa.byu.edu/service/redefine-service)).

Stephen R. Covey left us a ringing reminder of the principle I am attempting to define today when he wrote, "Ironically, you'll find that as you care less about what others think of you, you will care more about what others think of themselves and their worlds, including their relationship with you" (*The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic* [New York: Free Press, 2004], 61).

The world can be a frightening place.  
Not everyone will heed you.  
Don't hide yourself away from folks.  
Put others first; they need you.

As others you approach each day,  
Recall the social dearth  
That's swept the earth and hampered souls.  
But souls have such great worth.

Please notice those around you, and  
Take time to look and see  
The precious ones right in your path.  
Your friends they soon may be!

Those starving for the human touch  
That Saints should always grant.  
You'll make the world a better place,  
So please, don't say, "I can't."

Surrender all your ego and  
Put focus on the others  
Who pass you daily on your way—  
Your heavenly kin, your brothers.

Remember those who took the time  
To recognize and greet you?  
Then pass it on and do your best;  
Give folks a chance to meet you.

The world can be a happier place;  
More friends you're making too.  
Extend yourself and bless a life.  
It all begins with you.

During His earthly ministry the Savior noted, "I . . . know my sheep" (John 10:14). Shouldn't we then know each other? This cannot fully occur until we take time for others and recognize both their existence and worth. Of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus it is written, "And it came to pass, that, while they communed together and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them" (Luke 24:15). The Savior looked for ways to be with others. Let us not avoid such opportunity. As the hymn advises,

*Let's oft, then, in kindly toned voices,  
Our mutual friendship renew,  
Till heart meets with heart and rejoices  
In friendship that ever is true.*  
["Let Us Oft Speak Kind Words," *Hymns*, 2002,  
no. 232]

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, "Friendship is one of the grand fundamental principles of 'Mormonism'" (HC 5:517). Let us better open this campus to fellowshipping so that it may someday also be said of us, "And they did

fellowship one with another, and did rejoice one with another, and did have great joy." This is my sincere and humble prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.