

“Walk as Children of Light”

TINA TAYLOR DYCHES

While preparing for this devotional address, I felt prompted to speak about becoming as little children, like the Sunbeam children I have taught in Primary for so many years. I have a very dear place in my heart for these young children who are beginning to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ. I could share with you many amusing stories about them that show how their understanding is just emerging.

Trevor, for example, once sang, “I am a child of God, and he has sent me beer!” And Kevin, in every prayer he offered, prayed that Spiderman would demolish the Green Goblin—only to be interrupted each time by Anna, who would respond with a big sigh and say, “Oh, no! Not again!”

However, there are serious messages we can learn from children today—lessons that can teach us how to “walk as children of light” (Ephesians 5:8).

My love for teaching young children prompted me to search for information about Sunbeams and the beloved children’s hymn “Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam” (*Songbook*, 60–61). I learned that the song was written by Nellie Talbot in 1899:

Racking her brain for material for her Sunday School class in rural Missouri, she thought to herself, “How can you say there’s nothing to teach about when you have the sun and the sky and the trees and the flowers!”
[www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/i/1/1/illbeasb.htm]

Edwin Othello Excell, composer of “Count Your Blessings” (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 241) and the predominant arranger of “Amazing Grace,” wrote the music to the Sunbeam song, which was originally entitled “I’ll Be a Sunbeam.”

As I continued my search for the history of the Sunbeam song, I discovered that it had a connection to the first Sunbeam Band, an organization for the Christian training of young children (see *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* [Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1958], s.v. “Sunbeam Band,” 2:1314). The Sunbeam Band was formed in 1886, when Anna Louise Elsom, a young mother who taught children

Tina Taylor Dyches was an associate professor of counseling psychology and special education at Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 10 July 2007.

ages four to 13 at Fairmont Baptist Church in Nelson County, Virginia, “prayed that God would send someone to help her teach the boys and girls about missions” (www.vaiden.net/baptist.html). Soon George Braxton Taylor, a young pastor “with a ‘heart all aglow with a fire for missions,’ came right from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville to become the new pastor for the Fairmont Baptist Church” (*ibid.*). It was this young pastor who organized the first Sunbeam Band.

His name, George Braxton Taylor, jumped out at me. I thought to myself, “That name sounds familiar. I wonder if we are related.” So I went to the Taylor family tree that my father had compiled and found several George Taylors listed—which obviously meant it is a common name in my family. Upon viewing this chart more closely, I found that indeed there was a George Braxton Taylor who was born and lived in Virginia at about the same time as the pastor I had been reading about.

After going back and forth over a lot of historical and genealogical information, I found that the George Braxton Taylor who organized the first Sunbeam group was the same George on my family tree. It’s funny that I found him online when, meanwhile, gathering dust on my bookshelf was a 1908 copy of a book he wrote about his father, who was also a Baptist minister. Looking around my home for more material connected to George Braxton Taylor, I realized that I had two books written in the early 1800s by his grandfather—James Barnett Taylor, a prominent leader in the Baptist church—and I also had James’ personal spectacles and handcrafted desk.

Feeling a familial and even tangible connection to George Braxton Taylor, I became more interested in his service as pastor of Fairmont Baptist Church. It was there that Anna Louise Elsom called her class Sunbeams, “because the sunshine illuminated and warmed the corner of the church where she taught the children” (*ibid.*). The Sunbeam Band was organized in a

way that allowed the children to learn selflessness and the value of hard work:

Membership in the [Sunbeam] band required an initiation fee of one penny, followed by a contribution of one penny a month, all of which went to support missions. Historical documents note that Taylor insisted that the children earn the money they contributed. Most of the children earned their money by selling eggs and even dedicated the chickens to the cause by naming them after missionaries. [Ibid.]

The Sunbeam Band grew in three years to include more than 10,000 members (see *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*, 2:1314). In 1887 George Braxton Taylor explained the philosophy underlying the program: “The Sunbeam movement was not altogether to do things for children but that children might do things for others and for Jesus,” he said. George Taylor also wrote, “Not only can children receive, they can give. They can do their part in sending far and wide the story of Jesus.” (*Religious Herald*, March 1887; www.vaiden.net/baptist.html.)

Children around the world are proclaiming the story of Jesus. They make this proclamation when they sing “Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam.” This hymn teaches principles that are consistent with Pastor Taylor’s rationale for creating the Sunbeam Band. I would suggest that while we may not have been in the Sunbeam Band or even in a Sunbeam class in Primary, our Father in Heaven wants us to adhere to the principles taught in the Sunbeam song.

Most of you probably know only the first verse and chorus of this song. However, there are four verses, and I’d like to give you the opportunity to sing all four verses today.

*Jesus wants me for a sunbeam,
To shine for him each day;
In ev’ry way try to please him,
At home, at school, at play.*

Chorus

*A sunbeam, a sunbeam,
Jesus wants me for a sunbeam;
A sunbeam, a sunbeam,
I'll be a sunbeam for him.*

*Jesus wants me to be loving,
And kind to all I see;
Showing how pleasant and happy
His little one can be.*

Chorus

*I will ask Jesus to help me,
To keep my heart from sin;
Ever reflecting his goodness,
And always shine for him.*

Chorus

*I'll be a sunbeam for Jesus,
I can, if I but try;
Serving him moment by moment,
Then live with him on high.*

Chorus

["Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam," *The Children Sing* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1951), no. 101]

I would like to highlight four themes found in this hymn that, if followed, will help us "walk as children of light":

1. Please the Lord at home, at school, at play.
2. Be loving and kind.
3. Pray to keep our hearts from sin.
4. Serve the Lord moment by moment.

First, to "walk as children of light," we are taught to please the Lord at home, at school, at play.

After teaching the Sunbeam class for six years, I requested a change in assignment—not because I didn't love my service to these

young children but because I wanted a chance to teach my son, Logan, and his class, and they would soon be moving to senior Primary. I was yearning also for greater spiritual and scriptural depth in my lesson preparation.

Having this request granted, I began to teach the Valiant 9 children. I loved these older children who had such a beautiful depth of understanding of the gospel, but I still longed for the special times I had had with the Sunbeams. One Sunday during Primary opening exercises, I looked at the six rows of children who sat ahead of me and thought, "All of these children before me were once my Sunbeams! They are all just grown-up Sunbeams!" They still had the Light of Christ in their eyes, which were filled with innocence and love.

I dreaded the thought that any of these beautiful children of our Heavenly Father would make poor choices that would fill their lives with misery and sorrow, but I knew it could happen, because that is part of the plan of salvation. We all have the opportunity to make right and wrong choices, and we will inevitably make some wrong choices. I think Heavenly Father must feel intense sorrow when we, His children, act as if we no longer need Him to lead and guide us. Yet He loves us still.

All of us are really just grown-up Sunbeams. So how do we stay as innocent and humble as little children? We must stay close to the Spirit of the Lord. After His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus taught the people:

Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you: for he that walketh in darkness knoweth not whither he goeth.

While ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light. [John 12:35–36]

Daily reflection of how close we have remained or how far we have strayed from God's light will enable us to walk away from

darkness and choose paths that are filled with His light.

We are also able to shine with the Light of Christ when we understand that we are children of God. When we worry that we're not enough—not smart enough, not rich enough, not pretty enough, not buffed enough—then we risk losing the Light of Christ in exchange for our own, self-generated light, a light that soon fades.

Let us shine the Light of Christ at home, at school, at play, at work, and in any other place where we may be found. When we do so, we will feel His love filling our lives with the warmth and peace that can come only from the Son.

Second, to “walk as children of light,” we should be loving and kind.

Latter-day revelation teaches us that “little children are alive in Christ” (Moroni 8:12; see also verses 19, 22) and innocent before God. I believe that this purity brings much joy to their lives. If you have spent time watching little children, you will notice how pleasant and happy they can be. It has been estimated that children laugh 200 times a day, while adults laugh only 15 times a day (see Marion Balla, “Communication: The Road to Connection in Families,” *Transition Magazine* 28, no. 2 (June 1998); <http://www.vifamily.ca/library/transition/282/282.html>).

How can we be more pleasant and happy? The Sunbeam song teaches us that one way is to “be loving, / And kind to all I see.” We observe so much hatred, bitterness, selfishness, and greed in this world. We don't need to watch the evening news to know of these human problems; unfortunately, they are playing out before us in our homes and neighborhoods.

I can't imagine one of my grown-up Sunbeams spending time on the Internet viewing pornography; starving or bingeing and purging food in order to feel valued; harming a child physically; abusing a loved one emotion-

ally; or engaging in any other behavior that belittles, demeans, or harms self or others.

However, some of our more frequent and less egregious behaviors should concern us more than they do, because these slowly lead us away from things that are pleasant and happy. The behaviors to which I refer are our daily interactions with others, particularly with those we love. Do you ever find yourself treating strangers with more kindness and respect than you treat your family or friends?

While it may appear to be easier to respect those we don't know well or to love those who are most like ourselves, we have been commanded to love everyone. This includes those who have life circumstances different from our own, whether those circumstances be culture, race, religion, socioeconomic status, ability level, or any of a vast number of human differences.

Those of us in attendance today are not likely to commit grievous sins against ourselves or others; however, we may fail to be loving and kind by participating in something as simple and common as name calling. It is unthinkable that in this new global millennium we still allow people to demean and humiliate others who “don't belong.”

Let's try this experiment. Think of a term that represents a group with which you would not want to be identified. Now complete this sentence: “You can't do that. You're too (insert derogatory term).” You may have chosen a term that relates to religion, race, size, shape, or other attributes or categorical standing: “You're too lazy.” “You're too fat.” “You're too blond.” “You're too white.” “You're too [whatever].” How do we feel when we are included in a group that is designated as less valued?

What I hear too often on this campus and elsewhere is demeaning language toward a group of people who are least likely to defend themselves: those with disabilities. I think that without intending to disrespect those in this group, many people say, “You're so retarded!” or “You're a moron (or idiot or imbecile)!” All

of these are former technical terms for levels of intellectual disability. My friend Reed Hahne explains how we can be more respectful of all of God's children regardless of their abilities or perceived social desirability:

I am a young man who goes to school at Utah Valley State College, where I have a 4.0 grade point [average]. I have to work extra hard in college to earn good grades. I told my mom that there are two things about college that I don't like: homework and tests.

I also am a young man with Down syndrome. That is one of my characteristics. It is a part of who I am, but it is not all of who I am. All of us are distinct individuals. Some of you are tall or short. Some of you have blue eyes and blond hair; others of you have black hair and brown eyes. Some of us have to study hard to get good grades, while others have to work really hard to be good swimmers and runners. Everyone is gifted in some way.

I just finished performing in the musical Ragtime. I love school and I love performing. I want the same things that all of you want in life. I want to be happy. I want to have opportunities to get a good education and a good job. I want people to listen to me and respect me for my abilities and knowledge. I have many characteristics. I am fun to be around—I love people and making new friends. I'm good-looking. I'm a leader and a self-advocate. I love learning new things, trying new foods, and going to new places. Some other gifts that people with Down syndrome have are [things such as] we have lots of love to share, we are loyal and affectionate, [and] we help all of you to slow down and learn lessons about what is really important in life.

I know that I have Down syndrome because it is part of God's plan for me and for the earth at this time. I have been told by the Lord that I was sent here at this time to perform special work that only I could do. I have been told that I will have influence upon people that no one else could possibly have and that the Lord has a great work for me to do. I know part of my mission on earth is to be a teacher for other people with disabilities.

It is really hard for me when people look at me and see only the Down syndrome. Sometimes people talk to my parents, asking them questions about me when they should talk to me. I have opinions. Sometimes people call each other "retards." This is so very disrespectful in so many ways. If a person has a disability, it doesn't mean that they can't learn; it just means that they may learn a different way and that some things might take them longer to learn. I think people get in the habit of calling names and then use disrespectful words without realizing their meanings.

Nauvoo was my second mission. My first mission was at the institute of religion in Orem. Then I went to Nauvoo. While I was there I was called to be an ordinance worker in the Nauvoo Temple. I learned all of the temple ordinances. This really surprised many visitors to Nauvoo. I also performed, and I learned all of the scripts for the historic sites. It surprised people that I could do all of this. When we are given a chance, people with disabilities can do so many things.

It is important to look at each other and see our strengths and know that each of us is a child of God. He loves us, [and] He has given us potential and opportunities to grow on this earth.

I have a testimony of Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and President Hinckley. I read the scriptures every day. Thank you. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

To be loving and kind to all we see, let's begin with showing respect to all of God's children through positive thoughts and language. Then naturally we will be more inclined to treat others in Christlike ways.

Third, to "walk as children of light," we can pray to keep our hearts from sin.

I recently heard a young man tell his story of how he prayed to keep his heart from sin. At age 12 he began experimenting with drugs and alcohol, which led to many years of addiction and misery. Trying to find acceptance and love, he joined a gang, but still the search for his purpose in life was futile. Despondent and

alone, he tried to take his life, but he was not successful—either time.

According to his native culture, this young man, being the eldest male child in the family, was the rightful heir of his father’s vast wealth, possessions, and eventually his tremendously successful business. However, his parents were displeased with the way he was leading his life, so they sent him to a residential school in a foreign place—Utah—with hopes of reforming him.

His parents did not realize what reformation would take place in their son. After a short time attending school with many Latter-day Saint students, he noticed how happy they seemed and wondered what made them emanate a special light. While on a hike with school friends, he talked to a girl who was LDS and heard her say that she would give up everything for the gospel. “What is it,” he thought, “that makes this gospel so powerful that she would be willing to make such a sacrifice?”

Shortly thereafter he saw an LDS infomercial and decided to call the toll-free number, not realizing that missionaries would be sent to his dorm. After prayerful study, he decided to follow Jesus Christ. He gave up his status in the family, the respect of his parents, the promise of a grand inheritance, and a life of depression and substance abuse.

Because the light of the gospel shone through his friends, he was drawn to that light. Letting it become more powerful in his life, he gained help from the Lord to turn his heart from sin so that he could be “ever reflecting his goodness, / And always shine for him.”

Fourth, to “walk as children of light,” we will serve the Lord moment by moment.

There are many ways we can serve the Lord daily. However, one of the most powerful ways we can serve Him is to share the gospel with others. I am so very grateful for the missionaries who taught my parents the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

A few years after my parents had married and moved to Las Vegas, they had some concerns about moving into a house on Lacy Lane, partly because there were so many Mormons living on that street. Two months after that move, four-year-old Joni Christensen, a Mormon, invited my older sister, Tami, to attend a Primary Halloween party, and since Tami and Joni were such good friends, my sister also began attending midweek Primary activities.

Shortly following the party and after my father was asked the golden question by a coworker, two stake missionaries, Faye Boyd and Muriel Hammond, showed up at my parents’ home. My father told the missionaries he wasn’t a good prospect for their church, but he did want to know what they were teaching his daughter in Primary. The missionaries were probably thrilled to hear that!

My mother relates her feelings about the message these missionaries brought:

The second time they came to the home, it was the most unbelievable experience. As they were giving [us] the discussion, it was just like a light-bulb experience. I just knew in the depths of my soul that what I had been looking for all of my life I had finally found at the age of 21—that this was the gospel that I had searched so hard to find.

At this time she was pregnant with me. She recalls:

I just barely was pregnant with Tina. I wasn’t quite sure, but pretty sure. And so I tried to get out of the baptism by telling the missionaries that I would catch cold because it was December. It was down at the old First Ward chapel, and I didn’t want to catch cold. . . . And then they said that no one has ever caught cold from being baptized.

Within five weeks [we] had entered the waters of baptism, and my life would never be the same again. It’s by far the most important thing I ever did, and “sweet is the peace the gospel brings.” I searched

so long and so hard, and when I found the gospel it was so sweet.

Sister Boyd and Sister Hammond served the Lord “moment by moment,” and by so doing they changed my parents’ lives in such wonderful ways. In turn, my life has been blessed, and I hope that “moment by moment” I can bless the lives of others.

While imprisoned in Rome, Paul wrote an epistle to the Ephesians, admonishing them to become followers of God. He wrote, “For

ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light” (Ephesians 5:8). We can follow Paul’s admonition to walk as children of light by pleasing the Lord “at home, at school, at play”; by being loving and kind; by praying “to keep [our] heart[s] from sin”; and by serving the Lord “moment by moment.” It is my prayer that we will reflect the glory of the Son by being like the Sunbeams all around the world. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.