

“If Thou Art Merry, Praise the Lord” (D&C 136:28)

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Whiplash

One winter’s morning during a snow-storm, I took my mother to have some blood tests done. It was “white-knuckle” driving on snowy, icy roads. We were headed home and going around a corner very slowly. The car hit black ice, and as if in slow motion, we headed for the curb. THUNK! I quickly asked Mom, “Are you OK?”

“Yes.”

We continued cautiously, slowly.

Then I said in an oh-so-sarcastic kind of way, “So I suppose you’re going to sue me for whiplash.” Instantly she jumped in, moaning and holding her neck. “Oh . . . ohhhhhh . . . oh, my neck hurts. . . . Oh, I can’t move my head. . . . Oh dear, I have to call . . .” and she tried to say the name of one of the lawyers who advertises on TV. (“One call . . . that’s all!”) It was so spontaneous and so hilarious that we both laughed until we were screaming.

We eventually came up for air, but Mom kept the fun going for days, calling me, moaning and whining about her whiplash the minute I’d answer.

I’m so grateful for what I have learned from my parents about being cheerful, lighthearted, and—yes—sometimes silly.

It’s a blessing to have been asked to ponder the topic of being merry and praising the Lord. This is another of my “soul-search” topics. I pray that what I have prepared will be uplifting, comforting, thought provoking, and happifying—all in just twenty-five minutes!

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that “happiness is the object and design of our existence” (*Teachings*, 255).

That’s why our Heavenly Father’s plan is so often called the great plan of happiness. Happiness is part of our nature, as it is part of God’s nature. As Alma taught his son Corianton:

And now, my son, all men that are in a state of nature, or I would say, in a carnal state . . . are without God in the world, and they have gone contrary to the nature of God; therefore, they are in a state contrary to the nature of happiness. [Alma 41:11]

Mary Ellen Edmunds gave this Women’s Conference address at Brigham Young University on 29 April 2004.

We are born with a naturally sunny, optimistic, cheerful disposition. Feeling joy and happiness doesn't mean we're always laughing our heads off, although, laughter is very therapeutic! President James E. Faust has said: "Don't forget to laugh at the silly things that happen. Humor . . . is a powerful force for good when used with discretion. Its physical expression, laughter, is highly therapeutic" ("Learning for Eternity," *Brigham Young University 1997–98 Speeches* [Provo: Brigham Young University, 1998], 78). He's right! When we laugh hard, our heart rate speeds up, the circulatory and immune systems are stimulated, and more endorphins are produced. (And then they go perform at Sea World).

In Proverbs we read, "A merry heart doeth good [like] medicine" (17:22). I was told that Picabo Street, the great Olympic skier, wants to become a nurse and work in the ICU so she can answer the phone with "Picabo, ICU." Isn't it like a dose of good medicine when we laugh together? It feels unifying!

Abraham Lincoln once said: "With the fearful strain that is on me night and day, if I did not laugh I should die" (quoted in James E. Faust, "The Need for Balance in Our Lives," *Ensign*, March 2000, 4). I heard that if you want or need to laugh and you don't—if you suppress laughter—it goes to your hips and spreads out.

Sister Hinckley had (and I'm sure still has) a delightful sense of humor. She said: "The only way to get through life is to laugh your way through it. You either have to laugh or cry. I prefer to laugh. Crying gives me a headache" (Virginia H. Pearce, ed., *Glimpses into the Life and Heart of Marjorie Pay Hinckley* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999], 107). How we miss her.

A good sense of humor can help us in many ways in life. President Gordon B. Hinckley once said:

We've got to have a little humor in our lives. You had better take seriously that which should be taken seriously but, at the same time, we can bring in a touch of humor now and again. If the time ever comes when we can't smile at ourselves, it will be a sad time. [TGBH, 432]

Several years ago my friend Helen told me that in her little town of Vernon, Utah, where there were way too many crickets, they included some cricket recipes in their ward newsletter! I have a special appreciation for those who can laugh even in the midst of challenges.

Someone who tells jokes all the time—to whom everything is funny—does *not* have a sense of humor. And if we hurt someone's feelings, it's not funny. The essence of good humor is love! Thomas Carlyle wrote: "True humour springs not more from the head than from the heart; it is not contempt, its essence is love" (quoted in James E. Faust, "The Need for Balance in Our Lives," *Ensign*, March 2000, 4)

For a few years at the Missionary Training Center, I supervised those learning American Sign Language. One day the supervisor brought her group to my office door to announce they'd been asked to sing for the MTC Christmas program. I could tell something funny was about to happen by the look on her face.

"Do you want to know what they've chosen to sing?"

"Of course I do!"

"Our two numbers are "Do You Hear What I Hear?" and "I Heard Him Come." The missionaries, several of whom were deaf, laughed and clapped. So did I!

Lightheartedness vs. Lightmindedness

I want to return to President Faust's comment about humor being "a powerful force for good when used with discretion" ("Learning for Eternity," 78). I've done a lot of thinking about the difference between

lightheartedness and lightmindedness. I think lightmindedness is thoughtless—literally, without thought. It is empty, meaningless, and wasteful. Often there is hypocrisy and scorn associated with lightminded laughter. It is irreverent and unholy. It separates us from the Spirit. It's the things we talk and laugh about that don't encourage, cheer, or edify.

Lightheartedness is goodness—joyful goodness. It includes all that blesses and happinesses us and others. It's being of good cheer while focusing on the things that matter. It's a virtue.

Truman Madsen tells a story about Heber C. Kimball:

He is praying with his family and in the midst of the prayer says, "Father, bless Brother So-and-So." Then he bursts into a loud laugh. I can imagine the heads of his children popping up and their eyes opening. There is a slight pause, and then he says, "Lord, it makes me laugh to pray about some people," and he goes on with his prayer. (see Life of Heber C. Kimball, p. 427.) I leave you to say whether that is lightmindedness or profound intimacy with the Lord. He knows. We have a funny bone. He gave it to us. [The Radiant Life (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994), 6]

President Harold B. Lee has written,

I have never believed that in order to be righteous one must be sad-faced and solemn. People approved of the Lord have always been those who have laughed and danced and sung as well as worshipped, but at all times within proper bounds and not to excess. [Decisions for Successful Living (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 154]

I took note when Elder Ballard, in a visit to the MTC in September 1985, told the missionaries that "lightmindedness offends," and he said, "You can tell!" Then he added, "If we said you couldn't have a sense of humor, all the Brethren would be in jeopardy" (from author's personal notes).

President Boyd K. Packer wrote: "A good sense of humor is a characteristic of a well-balanced person. It has always been apparent that the prophets were men with very alert and pleasing senses of humor (*Teach Ye Diligently* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973], 210). I remember a time in the Tabernacle years ago on a Sunday morning during general conference when it was *hot*. Everyone was fanning themselves with whatever they could find. President Hinckley got up and said something like "It's hot in here. We know you're hot. But you're not as hot as you're going to be if you don't repent!" The laughter was instant and joyful.

We really are happy people. We can't help it! We know too much! We are like the Nephites—we "[live] after the manner of happiness" (2 Nephi 5:27). And we work at having happy hearts without being lightminded.

We certainly recognize the importance of reverence for all that is sacred. President Boyd K. Packer said, "There are some things just too sacred to discuss. . . . It is not that they are secret, but they are sacred, . . . to be harbored and to be protected and regarded with the deepest of reverence" ("The Spirit Beareth Record," *Ensign*, June 1971, 87). We are reverent about our Heavenly Father and His holy Son Jesus Christ, including being reverent with Their names. Jesus' name is the only name under heaven that can save us! (See Acts 4:12; 2 Nephi 25:20.)

President David O. McKay said, "The greatest manifestation of spirituality is reverence. . . . Reverence is profound respect mingled with love" ("Meditation, Communion, Reverence in Our Houses of Worship," *The Instructor*, October 1966, 371).

Happiness and Adversity

Happiness does not mean an absence of adversity. Why would our baptismal covenant include bearing one another's burdens if no one had any burdens? Why would we

covenant to mourn with those who mourn and comfort those who stand in need of comfort if no one ever mourned and no one ever needed comforting? (see Mosiah 18:8–9).

Elder Jack H. Goaslind has said:

I am convinced if we are to have happiness in our hearts, we must learn how to preserve it, in our hearts, in the midst of trouble and trial. We can control our attitude toward adversity. Some people are defeated and embittered by it, while others triumph over it and cultivate godlike attributes in the midst of it. ["Happiness," Ensign, May 1986, 54]

Probably each of us can think of someone who has been refined and who has become more godlike through trials. Elder Goaslind uses the word *cultivate*. It indicates work, doesn't it? We work to develop godlike attributes. President Hinckley has invited us to "cultivate an attitude of happiness. Cultivate a spirit of optimism" ("If Thou Art Faithful," *Ensign*, November 1984, 92).

Life may not always be exactly what we had in mind, but we're not alone. Have you noticed that sometimes you draw closer to your Heavenly Father when you are deeply in need? That's been my experience. And He comes. He is always willing to come. Listen again to what happened to the people of Alma when they were being persecuted by the former priests of Noah:

Lift up your heads and be of good comfort. . . .

And I will . . . ease the burdens . . . upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs, even while you are in bondage; and this will I do that ye may stand as witnesses for me hereafter, and that ye may know of a surety that I, the Lord God, do visit my people in their afflictions. [Mosiah 24:13–14]

Many of you can also be witnesses for Him hereafter, testifying that He also visited you in your afflictions.

Elder James E. Talmage said, "[Happiness] springs from the deeper fountains of the soul, and is not infrequently accompanied by tears. Have you never been so happy that you have had to weep? I have" ("A Greeting to the Missionaries," *Improvement Era*, December 1913, 173). We have too, haven't we?

Psalm 30 teaches, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (30:5). Doctrine and Covenants adds, "If thou art sorrowful, call on the Lord thy God with supplication, that your souls may be joyful" (136:29).

Happiness Is a Result of Righteousness

In 2 Nephi 2:13, Lehi is teaching his son Jacob about opposition:

And if ye shall say there is no law, ye shall also say there is no sin. If ye shall say there is no sin, ye shall also say there is no righteousness. And if there be no righteousness there be no happiness. And if there be no righteousness nor happiness there be no punishment nor misery. And if these things are not there is no God.

There *is* a God, there *is* righteousness, and there *is* happiness.

President Gordon B. Hinckley said, "Happiness comes of righteousness." He went on to teach that wickedness, sin, selfishness, and greed never bring happiness. And then he said, "Happiness lies in living the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ" ("Fast-Paced Schedule for the Prophet," *Church News*, 20 April 1996, 3).

It's true that "wickedness never was happiness" (Alma 41:10). And so righteousness never was misery. Adversity, deep water, and fiery trials for sure, but not misery. We can choose to cultivate either happiness or misery. Elder Goaslind has said:

Our joy in God's kingdom will be a natural extension of the happiness we cultivate in this life. ["Happiness," Ensign, May 1986, 53]

A few weeks ago, a woman shared with me a very interesting experience she had during her stake conference. She said her stake president invited all those who were happy to raise their hands. To them he said “Congratulations! You are candidates for the celestial kingdom. The rest of you need to repent!” Then he added, “I’m convinced that in the celestial kingdom there will only be happy people!”

Moroni illustrates this principle in Mormon 9:14:

And then cometh the judgment of the Holy One upon them; and then cometh the time that he that is filthy shall be filthy still; and he that is righteous shall be righteous still; and he that is happy shall be happy still; and he that is unhappy shall be unhappy still.

We will be “raised to happiness according to [our] desires of happiness” (Alma 41:5) and according to the degree to which we have cultivated happiness right here, right now.

An Attitude of Happiness and a Spirit of Optimism

Joy is a gift of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22). President Marion G. Romney said, “The key to happiness [or joy] is to get the Spirit and keep it” (CR, October 1961, 61). Heber C. Kimball said: “I am perfectly satisfied that my Father and my God is a cheerful, pleasant, lively, and good-natured Being. Why? Because I am cheerful, pleasant, lively, and good-natured when I have His Spirit” (JD 4:222). Has that been your experience? As you have felt the Spirit, have you also felt joy? Joy brings the Spirit, and the Spirit brings joy.

Brigham Young asked:

Where is happiness, real happiness? Nowhere but in God. By possessing the spirit of our holy religion, we are happy in the morning, we are happy at noon, [and] we are happy in the evening. . . . Every Latter-day Saint, who has experienced the love of

God in his heart, . . . realizes that he is filled with joy . . . happiness, and consolation. [DBY, 236]

Think of someone you enjoy being around, and think about *why*. Through the many years I’ve asked others this question, I can’t think of a single time when someone has said, “Oh, I like to be around Fifi—she is such a downer! What a pessimist! She’s so negative! I can’t be around her more than 2 minutes without feeling just awful!” Cheerful, optimistic people are pleasant to be around. This certainly includes President Hinckley, who has helped so many of us smile and laugh in a happy way. I feel that his optimism and good cheer come in large measure because of his goodness, his righteousness, and his absolute obedience.

Brigham Young said, “It does make the Devil mad . . . that he cannot afflict this people so as to make them have a sad countenance” (DBY, 236). Another time, he noted: “There is not a man or woman on this earth, whose peace is made with God, and who are associated with holy beings, and seeking after holy principles, but their countenances are lit up with a lamp of divine cheerfulness” (quoted in Truman G. Madsen, “‘The Joy of the Lord Is Your Strength’ (Nehemiah 8:10),” *Brigham Young University 2000–2001 Speeches* [Provo: Brigham Young University, 2001], 145). This is taught in Proverbs—“A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance” (Proverbs 15:13)—and by President Hinckley, who said, “Let the light of the gospel shine in your faces wherever you go and in whatever you do” (“Live the Gospel,” *Ensign*, November 1984, 86).

Passing Along Joy and Happiness to Children

More than 100 years ago, President George Q. Cannon said:

My experience has proved that there is greater happiness, purer joy and more delight to be obtained in serving God and being active in His work than can be obtained in any other direction. . . .

. . . We illustrate the great truth that a people can be a profoundly religious people and at the same time be a very happy people. I do not believe there is any happier people on the earth than the Latter-day Saints. . . . There must be the fountain of [happiness] within us; and wherever we go and have that spirit within us, we shall be happy. . . . We should cultivate this, and teach it to our children. [Collected Discourses Delivered by President Wilford Woodruff, His Two Counselors, the Twelve Apostles, and Others, comp. and ed. Brian H. Stuy (n.p.: B.H.S. Publishing, 1989), 5:394–95]

President Gordon B. Hinckley has encouraged: “Enjoy your membership in the Church. . . . Enjoy your activity. . . . Be happy in that which you do. Cultivate a spirit of gladness in your homes” (“Live the Gospel,” *Ensign*, November 1984, 86). I’m so thankful for the spirit my parents cultivated in our home. I thank both of them for the difference it has made in my life to have them share and nurture a sense of humor, a spirit of optimism, and a cheerful disposition. Another time I can share more about my father, but for now I have a few more things to say about my mother, who is close to 90 years old.

One of Mom’s most wonderful qualities is her ability to laugh at herself. Eleven years ago she suffered a major stroke. This affected her in many ways, including her speech, reading, and writing. Just four months after the stroke, she gave a talk right here in the Marriott Center at women’s conference. One of the things she said in her halting way was not to wait to have a stroke—that you could probably enjoy it more if you had it when you were younger. She felt she had waited too long.

One time in her hospital room, my brother Frank and I were watching as she went to the mirror to brush her teeth. She picked up the tube of toothpaste and stood looking at it. Then, very carefully, she put a little dab on her finger. We kept watching, not wanting to interrupt and trying not to laugh. She looked in the

mirror and down at her finger, and then she began to rub the toothpaste on her nose. That did it. We started laughing, and she laughed harder than we did. Frank commented that she wouldn’t be getting any cavities on her nose!

This past September, my mother went with me to St. George for a women’s conference. This was during the annual senior games, and as we shuffled into the motel—Mom leaning on her walker and me dragging our luggage—we noticed all the ship-shape senior athletes. I said to her, “Hey, Mom. They think we’re here for the senior games! They’re wondering what our sport is!” That cracked us up!

I’ve spent some challenging times in places far away from my family and from basic conveniences. One thing that “has made all the difference” is to receive letters and packages from home. Once when I was in Hong Kong, Mom sent me a nose-and-glasses combination. How did she know I’d love that? She’s my mother, that’s how. I’d wear it around, including on the busses, and watch for the fun and smiles all around me. When I was in Indonesia, she’d send boxes filled with lovely things she’d found in her basement or at Deseret Industries or received from neighbors wanting to get rid of stuff—from rat traps to aprons, from old drapes to kazoos. While I was in Africa she sent me a Tupperware catalogue, saying that she thought it’d be nice for the sisters out in the bush to have a Tupperware party. We *can* pass along joy and good cheer—and a good sense of humor—to our children and others.

President James E. Faust commented:

For many years as I have blessed newborn children, including my own, I have blessed them with a sense of humor. I do this with the hope that it will help guard them against being too rigid, that they will have balance in their lives, and that situations and problems and difficulties will not be overdrawn.

[“The Need for Balance in Our Lives,” *Ensign*, March 2000, 4]

A mother who was diagnosed with cancer told of being isolated in a bare room for many long days behind closed lead-lined doors, feeling like a prisoner convicted of a crime she didn't commit. Then she tells of her oldest daughter coming to visit:

*She sat down behind the lead screen that separated us and proceeded to take off her boots and socks. She slipped her socks on her hands and pretended they were puppets and spoke through them. I laughed for the first time in months. That simple act brightened my outlook instantly. [Emily Farmer, "What Do I Say to Someone Who Is Dying?" *Ensign*, April 1990, 73]*

"Count your many blessings, name them one by one"—you never know when one might be missing! Gratitude leads to joy and happiness, just as joy and happiness lead to gratitude and contentment. President Lorenzo Snow said, "It is . . . the duty of every Latter-day Saint to cultivate a spirit of gratitude" (quoted in Rulon D. Pope, "Free-Riding and Gratitude," *Brigham Young University 1999–2000 Speeches* [Provo: Brigham Young University: 2000], 102).

Heavenly Father Wants Us to Be Happy

Our Heavenly Father and the Savior want us to experience joy, happiness, and good cheer. President Gordon B. Hinckley has said, "I am satisfied that our Father in Heaven likes to see His children happy—not miserable, but happy" (*TGBH*, 256). A *Church News* article states: "Some unfortunate souls think that joy is a luxury, one of life's frills they cannot afford or do not deserve. But . . . it is God who decided that joy is the very purpose for our existence" ("Choosing Joy," *Church News*, 6 February 1993, 16). His plan really *is* the great plan of happiness!

Elder Matthew Cowley commented:

I like to get fun out of this business—good, wholesome, righteous fun—get a kick out of it. When I

obey the principles of this gospel, I am the happiest man on earth. When I don't, then I am depressed, then I have a right to worry about myself; but, when I am trying to do the best I know, then I tell you, I am having the time of my life. [Matthew Cowley Speaks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 133]

Elder Neal A. Maxwell said: "Ultimate hope and daily grumpiness are not reconcilable. It is ungraceful, unjustified, and unbecoming of us as committed Church members to be constantly grumpy or of woeful countenance" (*Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997], 164).

President Hinckley has several quotes on this topic in the collection of his teachings: "It is very important to be happy in this work. We have a lot of gloomy people in the Church because they do not understand, I guess, that this is the gospel of happiness. It is something to be happy about, to get excited about" (*TGBH*, 256); "I hope you enjoy this work. I really do. Notwithstanding all the problems, this is a work of happiness. This is the good news! This is a work of joy! I hope you can laugh and smile and be happy and rejoice before the Lord" (*TGBH*, 255); "Your happiness lies in following the gospel of Jesus Christ. . . . Happiness lies in faithfulness and in righteousness" (*TGBH*, 256). That's it! That's the key! Our happiness lies in following the gospel of Jesus Christ—in having faith in Him, believing Him, coming unto Him, and becoming more like Him.

May our deep and tender feelings about the Savior bring us comfort, peace, hope, joy, gratitude, contentment, optimism, a countenance of divine cheerfulness, and genuine happiness. He is the one who invites us to "be of good cheer, and do not fear, for I the Lord am with you, and will stand by you" (D&C 68:6).

He will. He does. I know it.