

Families

ROBERT B. HARBERTSON

May I introduce my remarks today with two questions: (1) what is your relationship with your parents, and (2), for those of you who are married, what is your relationship with your companion and your children? Now, think seriously about these questions for a moment. Are you comfortable with your thoughts and feelings? Does pride and joy start to swell within your heart? Or is there a tinge of resentment or guilt or even fear?

I remember one of our missionaries who had just arrived in the mission field. We were having a testimony meeting in the living room of the mission home in Fresno, California. He stood to bear his testimony and, oh, how pathetic it was. No testimony was expressed. He only dwelled on how much he hated his father and how he disliked being in his home and said the only reason he came on a mission was to get away from his parents. My heart almost broke I felt so sorry for this young elder. I wondered what had caused such feelings and what had gone wrong in his home. It just didn't seem fair, no matter where the fault might lie. It made me reflect back to my home, my parents, and what my feelings were at that age. Oh, how blessed I was to have parents that loved me—yes, that even loved me enough to guide me, direct me, and even discipline me

when necessary. My feelings of love and security were so strong for my parents and home that when it came time to choose which basketball scholarship I should take (and I had been offered full-ride scholarships to several colleges and universities), I picked the one that was closest to home. I just wanted to be at home!

The Real Treasures in Life

The scriptures reveal some beautiful family relationships that help to guide and strengthen all of us. In the book of Ruth we read of the great love and devotion a daughter-in-law had for her husband's mother. The husbands of Naomi and her daughters-in-law had died, leaving them alone. Naomi decided to return to her home in Bethlehem and suggested that the two daughters return to their own people. After some discussion, one of the daughters, Orpah, went her way, but Ruth clave unto her

Robert B. Harbertson was a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this fireside address was given at Brigham Young University on 2 June 1985.

mother-in-law. Quoting from chapter 1:15–17, Naomi said:

Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister in law.

And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God:

Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.

What a choice relationship. How special they must have treated one another. Naomi even helped Ruth to capture the heart of Boaz, a mighty man of wealth. Through their marriage Ruth bore Obed, and Obed begat Jesse, who was the father of King David.

There must have been great love and trust in the family of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. I have tried to relate to the awful task the Lord gave to Abraham when he said, “Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of” (Genesis 22:2). I’m afraid I find it impossible to relate to. My love and respect and admiration for Abraham is overwhelming. His testimony of the gospel and love for our Heavenly Father must have been pure and without blemish. Even the Lord said, “For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him” (Genesis 18:19).

I have tried to picture Abraham and his son as they made their trek to the mountain with their arms over each other’s shoulders as I have done with my sons on many occasions. What emotion must have filled Abraham’s being as he followed God’s command. What

love, faith, and trust Isaac must have had in his father as he said:

My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them, together.

Even at this point Abraham could not bring himself to tell his son what was to happen.

And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. [Genesis 22:7–10]

The test had been met; God’s will meant more to both than mortal fears and desires. What love and understanding Abraham and Sarah had taught their mighty son Isaac. Of course, Isaac was spared and became a mighty man unto God.

What a thrill it must have been for Shiblón to hear the words of his father, Alma, to know of the faith and trust he had in him, and the love and pride his father felt for him as he said,

And now, my son, I trust that I shall have great joy in you, because of your steadiness and faithfulness unto God; for as you have commenced in your youth to look to the Lord your God, even so I hope that you will continue in keeping his commandments; for blessed is he that endureth to the end.

I say unto you, my son, that I have had great joy in thee already, because of thy faithfulness and thy diligence, and thy patience and thy long-suffering among the people of the Zoramites.

For I know that thou wast in bonds; yea, and I also know that thou wast stoned for the word’s sake; and thou didst bear all these things with patience because the Lord was with thee; and now thou

knowest that the Lord did deliver thee. [Alma 38:2–4]

I'm sure a great father-son relationship existed between them.

I have often thought how pleased and proud our Father in Heaven must have been as he introduced his son, Jesus Christ, to the Nephites. What a noble and valiant son. Such a caring and loving Father. What great meaning in his words, "Behold my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, in whom I have glorified my name—hear ye him" (3 Nephi 11:7).

Are we creating these kinds of relationships with our parents and children? Are our priorities in order? Is there anything in the world more precious or eternal than families? Can greater joy or security be felt and experienced than that felt within a family? I fear in some cases we allow the natural man or woman to overshadow the real treasures in life.

"I've Never Told Anyone I Loved Them"

I was amazed as a mission president to find out how few of our missionaries had truly experienced love, warmth, and understanding in their homes. It seemed to be the exception rather than the rule that a missionary could give and accept love freely. It had not been taught or experienced in their homes. I had grown up in a home where I loved, hugged, and kissed my dad freely. It had meant so much to me that I decided when I had my first interview with each of our elders I would give them a hug and after every interview we would end with a hug and expression of love. I couldn't believe the reactions I got. Some just melted in my arms while others didn't know how to react or what to do. Some stood as rigid as boards. They had never had their dad's arms around them in their whole life.

I remember one elder that came to us with the sourest look on his face that I had ever seen. He would come in for each interview and sit down with this same unhappy expression.

I would say, "What's the matter, Elder? Why don't you ever smile?" About all I would ever get out of him was a grunt or two and never an answer. We would have a poor interview, and at the end we would stand and I would put my arms around him. I could almost feel him shudder with disgust. This went on for several months with no change. He was a most unhappy young man. He had no success in his areas. He had companionship problems. Nothing went well.

Finally he came in for another interview and I said, "What's the matter, Elder? Can't you tell me?"

He looked at me for a moment and then he said, "You want to know what's the matter? I'll tell you." I thought, great, we're finally going to get to the bottom of this thing.

He said, "I can't stand you."

Well, I could have wished for a lot of other answers besides that one. He said, "I can't stand to have you put your arms around me. I've never had a man's arm around me, not even my dad's. And besides that, I can't stand to have you tell me you love me. No one has ever told me that, not even my mother and dad, and I have never told anyone I loved them." He was really rolling now. The flood-gate was wide open. I was wondering why I had ever asked him the question.

He said, "I had a seminary teacher that was just like you. All the kids just loved him and I hated him."

Well, I didn't know what to say. I was dumb-founded. To be told you're hated isn't necessarily the greatest thing to hear. Finally I said, "Well, Elder, I'm really sorry I offend you, and I'm sorry it bothers you so to have me put my arms around you. I promise I will never put my arms around you again. And I won't tell you I love you, but I want you to know that I truly do." Well, we got up, shook hands, and out the door he went. No more hugs, no more I love yous.

Finally it came time for Sister Harbertson and me to return home. I felt I had totally failed this elder. He came in for his final interview with about the same response. We got up, shook hands, and he walked to the door and then turned around and said, “President Harbertson, will you do something for me?”

I said, “Certainly, what is it?”

He said, “Will you give me a hug?” I grabbed that elder and almost squeezed him to death.

He said, “President, I want you to know that I love you!” He even got up in our zone conference and for the first time in his whole life verbally expressed love for his companion and then turned around and expressed his love for Sister Harbertson and me.

We went home; he still had some months to serve. When he got home he came to the first mission reunion he could. There he sat in the middle of that large group of missionaries with the biggest smile you have ever seen. After the meeting he came up to me and gave me a big hug and told me he loved me. I asked him how the rest of his mission went, and he said, “After you went home it went great!” Well, I think I know what he meant.

Now, why did that young man have to go through twenty years of not being loved or giving love? It isn’t fair or right. Good homes are so important.

These Precious Moments

Sons and daughters, are you really putting forth the effort to be close to your parents? Do you really know them and understand them? Parents, do you know your children? Are you enjoying each phase of their lives and being a strong influence for good? The greatest influence in a child’s life is his parents. Attitudes and personalities are greatly affected by this relationship. In the Doctrine and Covenants we read, “And that wicked one cometh and taketh away light and truth, through disobedience, from the children of men, and because of the tradition of their fathers” (D&C 93:39). As this

verse points out, the traditions of our fathers, the way we act, the things we do and say seem to significantly influence our children. Will you be happy if your children follow in your footsteps? Are you as children being obedient to God’s way of life in order that you may enjoy the strength and direction of the Holy Ghost? I am reminded of a song that was popular a couple of years ago called “Cat’s in the Cradle,” by Harry and Sandy Chapin.

*My child arrived just the other day,
He came to the world in the usual way,
But there were planes to catch and bills to pay,
He learned to walk while I was away;
And he was talkin’ ‘fore I knew it,
And as he grew he’d say,
“I’m gonna be like you, Dad,
You know I’m gonna be like you.”*

Chorus:

*And the cats in the cradle and the silver spoon
Little boy blue and the man in the moon.
“When ya comin’ home, Dad?” “I don’t know
when,
But we’ll get together then, You know we’ll have a
good time then.”*

*My son turned ten just the other day,
He said, “Thanks for the ball, Dad, come on let’s
play,
Can you teach me to throw?” I said, “Not today,
I got a lot to do.” He said, “That’s okay.”
And he walked away, but his smile never dimmed,
It said, “I’m gonna be like him, yeah,
You know I’m gonna be like him.”*

*Well, he came from college just the other day,
So much like a man, I just had to say,
“Son, I’m proud of you, can you sit for awhile?”
He shook his head and he said with a smile,
“What I’d really like, Dad, is to borrow the car keys,
See you later, can I have them please?”*

I’ve long since retired, my son’s moved away.

*I called him up just the other day.
I said, "I'd like to see you if you don't mind."
He said, "I'd love to, Dad, if I can find the time.
You see, my new job's a hassle and the kids have the
flu,
But it's sure nice talkin' to you, Dad,
It's been sure nice talkin' to you."
And as I hung up the phone it occurred to me,
He'd grown up just like me, my boy was just like
me.*

*Chorus:
And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon,
Little boy blue and the man in the moon.
"When you comin' home, Son?" "I don't know
when,
But we'll get together then, Dad,
We're gonna have a good time then."*

Don't allow this to happen in your lives. These precious moments—each experience and stage of life—can only be lived once. Richard L. Evans had some special feelings in this regard, and in part said this:

*Those who are overly impatient for the future may let the happiness and opportunities, and also the obligations of the present pass them by.
. . . Happiness [is a matter] of learning to "respect . . . the present hour" . . . learning to live each day. . . This is our time, our day, . . . and we had better learn to live and "labor while it is called today" being mindful of each day's opportunities and obligations. [Thoughts for One Hundred Days (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1966), p. 129]*

President Kimball once said this,

Fathers, what is your report concerning your family? Will you be able to report that you created an environment in your home to build faith in a living God, to encourage learning, to teach order, obedience, and sacrifice? That you often shared your testimony of the reality of your Father in heaven, of the truthfulness of the restored gospel with your

wife and children? Will you be able to report that you followed the living prophets? That your home was where your tender children could feel protected and safe, and where they felt the love and acceptance and warmth of you and their mother? ["The Example of Abraham," Ensign, June 1975, p. 7]

First, it appears that an accounting must take place—a report regarding our stewardship as a father, mother, husband, wife, son, or daughter. With a listening ear our Lord will judge our lives. Obviously, teaching faith in God and obedience to his commandments is of prime importance. I'm particularly interested in his question regarding the children and if home is a place where they feel protection, safety, love, and warmth.

Feeling Safe and Secure

I remember, as a small boy, sitting on my dad's lap and hearing him tell me about when he was a boy and how afraid he was of the dark, and how he would wake up in the night and be so frightened that he would jump out of bed and run to his parents' room. There Grandma would always let him get in bed with her and then everything was alright. I don't know if it was because of Dad telling me about this or not, but I grew up a total coward. I had, and still do have, a great fear of the dark. I understand why the scriptures relate darkness to that which is not good. My biggest challenge day after day as a boy was going to bed each night because I would have to turn out the light and then get clear across the room and into bed before a booger could get me. I knew they were in the closet and under the bed and behind the curtains. I got so I would start to run, hit the light, take one step inside the room, and then take a huge leap and hit the bed—most of the time! Mother never did know why the springs were broken on that side of the bed. Once in bed, up would go the covers over my head, and there I would lay paralyzed until I went to sleep.

Invariably I would wake up in the middle of the night and figure for sure I was a goner. Finally, when I just couldn't stand it any longer, I would throw back the covers and leap out of bed so the boogers under the bed couldn't grab me, race past the closet that must have always had a couple in there, and then run down the hall to Dad and Mother's bedroom. That hall seemed like it was as long as a football field. Now that I think about it, it was only about ten feet long. But I had to go past the bathroom, the door to the kitchen, and the door to the living room, and you know who was lurking at each of them! Once in the bedroom I could see my dad's big arm raise in the air with the bed covers in his hand and I would jump in beside him. Down would come the covers and his arm over me. Then I knew there wasn't a booger in the world big enough to get me. I have often wondered what would have happened if one night my dad would have said, "Bobby, you big boob, get back in your own bed!" I'm afraid it would have caused permanent damage, But he loved me, he understood, and I knew I was safe and secure in the arms of my dad and that he would never turn me away.

Are you enjoying the warmth and security and love of your parents? Do you counsel with them? Are you sharing precious experiences with them? Do you listen to them? When you return home can they see and feel and hear of your love for them? Are you too big to hug and kiss them now? Remember, one day they will be gone.

Live Each Day

I would like to quote the words of another song that was popular a few years ago called "Everything I Own," by David Gates of the group Bread. You may wonder where I hear these songs—on our boat at Lake Powell. We are a boating family. We kept a boat at Lake Powell and in the boat was a tape deck. The agreement with the children was, "You play one of your tapes, then we get to play one of

ours." We played Tabernacle Choir music and the kids played the rest! You know what—some of the words and music to some of those songs were pretty good. Anyway, listen to these words.

Verse 1

*You sheltered me from harm
Kept me warm, kept me warm.
You gave my life to me
Set me free, set me free.
The finest years I ever knew
Were all the years I had with you.*

Chorus

*And I would give anything I own,
Give up my life, my heart, my home.
I would give everything I own
Just to have you back again.*

Verse 2

*You taught me how to love
What it's of, what it's of.
You never said too much;
But still you showed the way,
And I knew from watching you:
Nobody else could ever know
The part of me that can't let go.*

Chorus

*And I would give anything I own,
Give up my life, my heart, my home.
I would give everything I own
Just to have you back again.*

Verse 3

*Is there someone you know,
You're loving them so,
But taking them all for granted?
You may lose them one day,
Someone takes them away,
And they don't hear the words
You long to say.*

Chorus

*And I would give anything I own,
Give up my life, my heart, my home.
I would give everything I own
Just to have you back again,
Just to touch you once again.*

I understand the young man who wrote this song had lost his father not long before and was expressing his deep feelings. They are most meaningful to me because I lost my dad, very unexpectedly, when I was only thirty-one. I thought my dad would live forever. He was too big, too strong, he was my hero, and yet without warning he was gone. Though I was married with children of my own, I missed him so much. I just craved to have him hold me once again. Please live each day so that you will not have regrets, no matter what may happen.

Loving Is Living

Love is such a special feeling. It brings so much joy and meaning to life. Those who radiate love truly enjoy the spirit of God. One of my favorite verses in the scriptures is this:

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

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

Is not the home where we learn to love, where we are first loved and made to feel secure and important? I would like to tell you a story entitled “Love is a Shining Thing,” by Arthur Gordon.

They sat together on the porch steps, so close that their moonshadow was a single wedge of blackness against the weathered wood. Tomorrow was the wedding, with all the excitement and confusion, tears and laughter. There would be no privacy then. But this quiet hour was their own.

She said, “Its peaceful, isn’t it?” She was watching the great stately clouds march over their heads and drop from sight into the quick-silver sea. He was watching her, and thought that he had never seen her so beautiful.

The wind blew; the waves made little hush, hush sounds, sighing against the sand. “You know,” she said, “I always wondered how I’d feel the night before my wedding. Scared or thrilled, or uncertain, or what.”

“You’re not scared, are you?”

“Oh no,” she said quickly. She hugged his arm and put her face against his shoulder in the impulsive way she had. “Just a little solemn, maybe. Solemn and gay, and young and old, and happy and sad. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes,” he said, “I know.”

“It’s love that does it, I suppose,” she said.

“That old thing; we’ve never talked about it much, have we? About love itself, I mean?”

He smiled a little, “We never had to.”

“I’d sort of like to—now,” she said. “Do you mind? I’d like to try to tell you how I feel before tomorrow happens.”

“Will it be any different after tomorrow?”

“No, but I may not be able to talk about it then. It may go down somewhere deep inside, below the talking level.”

“All right,” he said. “Tell me about love.”

. . . She leaned back clasping her hands around her knees, the moonlight bright and ecstatic on her face.

“Oh, it’s so many things. Waltzing in the dark; waiting for the phone to ring, opening the box of flowers. It’s holding hands in a movie; it’s humming a sad little tune; it’s walking in the rain; it’s riding in a convertible with the wind in your hair. It’s the quarreling and making up again. It’s the first warm drowsy thought in the morning and the last kiss at night.”

She broke off suddenly and gave him a desolate look. “But it’s all been said before, hasn’t it?”

“Even if it has,” he told her gently, “that doesn’t make it any less true.”

“Maybe I’m just being silly,” she said doubtfully. “Is that the way love seems to you?”

He did not answer for awhile. At last he said, “I might add a little to your definition.”

“You mean you wouldn’t change it?”

“No, just add to it.”

She put her chin in her hands. “Go ahead, I’m listening.”

He took out the pen she had given him and looked at it for a moment. “You said it was a lot of little things. You’re right. I could mention a few that don’t have much glitter. But they have an importance that grows.”

She watched his lean fingers begin to move. “Tell me,” she said.

“Oh, coming home to somebody when the day is ended—or waiting for somebody to come home to you. Giving, or getting, a word of praise when none is really deserved. Sharing a joke that nobody else understands. Planting a tree together and watching it grow. Sitting up with a sick child. Remembering anniversaries. Do I make it sound terribly dull?”

She did not say anything; she shook her head.

“Everything you mentioned is part of it,” he went on. “But it’s not all triumphant, you know. It’s also sharing disappointment, and sorrow. It’s going out to slay the dragon, and finding the dragon too much for you, and running away—but going out again the next day. It’s the little chips of tolerance that you finally knock off the granite of your ego, not saying, ‘I told you so,’ not noticing the dented fender on the family car. It’s the gradual acceptance of limitations—your own as well as others. It’s discarding some of the ambitions you had for yourself and planting them in your children.” His voice trailed off into the glistening night.

“Are you talking” she asked finally, “about living or loving?”

“You’ll find,” he said, “there’s not much of one without the other.”

“When—when did you learn that?”

“Quite a while ago, before your mother died.” His hand touched her shining hair.

“Better get to bed now, baby. Tomorrow’s your big day.”

She clung to him suddenly. “Oh, Daddy, I’m going to miss you so.”

“Nonsense,” he said gruffly, “I’ll be seeing you all the time. Run along now.” But after she had gone he sat there for a long time, alone in the moonlight.

On the wall in our family room is a plaque which has these words written on it: “The greatest gift a father can give his children is to love their mother.” I really like that. Nothing is more beautiful or reassuring than the eternal love between a husband and wife. That kind of love involves so many things that bring joy, security, strength, respect, and a desire to do the same in our own children. One of my favorite love stories brings out this kind of love, and it’s a true one.

Soon after he was married, Thomas Moore, the famous 19th-century Irish poet, was called away on a business trip. Upon his return he was met at the door not by his beautiful bride, but by the family doctor.

“Your wife is upstairs,” said the doctor. “But she has asked that you do not come up.” And then Moore learned the terrible truth: his wife had contracted smallpox. The disease had left her once flawless skin pocked and scarred. She had taken one look at her reflection in the mirror and commanded that the shutters be drawn and that her husband never see her again.

Moore would not listen. He ran upstairs and threw open the door of his wife’s room. It was black as night inside. Not a sound came from the darkness. Groping along the wall, Moore felt for the gas jets.

A startled cry came from a black corner of the room. “No! Don’t light the lamps.”

Moore hesitated, swayed by the pleading in the voice.

“Go!” she begged. “Please go! This is the greatest gift I can give you, now.”

Moore did go. He went down to his study where he sat up most of the night, prayerfully writing.

Not a poem this time, but a song. He had never written a song before, but now he found it more natural to his mood than simple poetry. He not only wrote the words, he wrote the music, too. And the next morning as soon as the sun was up he returned to his wife's room.

He felt his way to a chair and sat down. "Are you awake?" he asked.

"I am," came a voice from the far side of the room, "But you must not ask to see me. You must not press me, Thomas."

"I will sing to you, then," he answered. And so, for the first time, Thomas Moore sang to his wife the song that still lives today:

*Believe me, if all those endearing young charms,
Which I gaze on so fondly to-day,
Were to change by to-morrow, and fleet in my arms,*

*Like fairy-gifts fading away,
Thou wouldst still be adored, as this moment thou art,*

Let thy loveliness fade as it will.

Moore heard a movement from the dark corner where his wife lay in her loneliness, waiting. He continued:

*Let thy loveliness fade as it will,
And around the dear ruin each wish of my heart
Would entwine itself verdantly still. . . .*

*The song ended. As his voice trailed off on the last note, Moore heard his bride rise. She crossed the room to the window, reached up and slowly threw open the shutters. [Galen Drake, *Guideposts*, Sept. 1957]*

I have yet to see a relationship that is not greatly enhanced when this kind of sensitive love and understanding is expressed by a husband to his wife. To a great extent the attitude and feelings one experiences through the day are generated by the atmosphere and environment felt in the home, Happiness, with all that is attached to it, is what we all desire and hope for. And yet, quite often, we seem to do and say those things that are contrary and in exact opposition to happiness.

There is a simple but very important law taught time after time in the scriptures called the law of the harvest. Simply stated, it is this: "As ye sow, so shall ye reap." I don't believe it is ever more true than in a family relationship. The more one does for his mate, children, parents or brothers and sisters, the more he will receive in return. Good stimulates and nourishes good. The Lord expressed this truth most beautifully when he said,

Fear not to do good, my sons, for whatsoever ye sow, that shall ye also reap; therefore, if ye sow good ye shall also reap good for your reward.

Therefore, fear not, little flock; do good; let earth and hell combine against you, for if ye are built upon my rock, they cannot prevail. [D&C 6:33–34]

May God bless each one of us to do all in our power to make our homes and relationships as parents, companions, and children special, and to invite the Spirit of the Lord to help and direct us as we prepare for eternal life together as families, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.