

Differences . . . “Allow All Men the Same Privilege”

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Differences in People

One of my earliest childhood memories is of my father, who was a blessed peacemaker, settling disputes in our family by using a Samoan saying he had learned on his mission in the South Seas a few years before: “Asi, asi paco”, he would say (I’m sure my mother and my brother remember it), which he said meant literally, “Ducks are different” or in other words, “Each of us is unique; be tolerant. People *are* different but that’s not necessarily bad.” I feel certain that this oft-repeated experience with my father was the beginning of my understanding about differences in people.

A learned truth is like a magnet, pulling related ideas to itself. Our lives become collections of such ideas which solidify into principles we live by. Eventually those earliest ideas become responses. The genuine responses of our lives reflect our souls’ growth.

Responses to Criticism

Recently I listened to President Gordon B. Hinckley apply the same principle my father had taught, and the magnet in me responded. He said:

We live in a society that feeds on criticism. Faultfinding is the substance of columnists and

commentators, and there is too much of this among our own people. It is so easy to find fault, and to resist doing so requires much of discipline . . .

He went on to say:

*The enemy of truth would divide us and cultivate within us attitudes of criticism which, if permitted to prevail, will only deter us in the pursuit of our great, divinely given goal. We can not afford to permit it to happen. [“Five Million Members—a Milestone and Not a Summit,” *Ensign*, May 1982, p. 46]*

How should we respond in these ambiguous times as we are faced with such daily criticism and hostility in the world? And, how should we respond to the everyday frictions and failings in our own lives?

I would like to suggest that part of the answer can be found in two phrases in our own Articles of Faith. The title for my remarks today was taken from the eleventh article of faith and is, I’m sure, familiar to you:

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We claim the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may.

“We allow all men the same privilege”. We could define that as *tolerance* or the idea that my father wanted me to understand.

The second phrase inspires me, lifts me, and is related to the first. I wonder how many of you have ever thought of it by itself, tucked away as it is in the lofty thirteenth article of faith:

“We believe . . . in doing good to *all* men.” We could define this as *compassion*, or the Savior’s kind of love. I see “doing good to all men” a step beyond “allowing all men the same privilege.” My contention is that tolerance leads to compassion and that there are no shortcuts to Christlike love which can bypass tolerance.

Differences May Separate Us

Our common problem could be defined as *intolerance* or *self-righteousness*, other words for the faultfinding and criticism President Hinckley described. Why *are* you and I critical and intolerant of those around us? Let’s be honest. Sometimes we’re jealous. They have what we want. Do the following critical statements sound familiar?

“He’s boring, always in the books, gets in the nineties on every exam.”

or

“She’s engaged. What a flirt! I wonder if she’ll really make it to the altar!”

or

“He’s just a big dumb athlete. He’s broken a few records, but I bet he doesn’t ever show up for class.”

But we’re not always jealous when we’re critical. So why do we find fault? I suggest it’s because of those differences my father pointed out to me. We separate ourselves by the differences we see. We feel comfortable with those

who dress the way we do, think the way we do, act the way we do; and uncomfortable with those who are different. Physical differences are one example of our discomfort. How do you feel around a person with a conspicuous birthmark, a missing limb, a spastic condition which causes jerky muscle movement, a blind person, or someone confined to a wheelchair? Of course, you’d never criticize such a person, but would you put forth the effort to get past the difference to establish a warm relationship? The gospel teaches us that the eternal in our natures provides kinship that no physical differences, including age, should undermine. How well I remember, when I was 35, the tender moment when a lovely 82-year-old woman whom I had idealized told me she prized me as her friend. Foolishly I had never seen friendship bridging the so-called age barrier in that way.

Differences That Don’t Matter

Some differences, like the physical ones I’ve just noted, don’t matter at all and should never divide us. Cultural differences also fall into this category. We are a worldwide church and represent many different cultures. We cannot afford lapses into provincialism.

Much of what I know I have learned from watching and listening to those older and wiser and *younger and wiser* than myself whom I have lived near enough to see and hear up close. As a young bride, newly arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I was experiencing some cultural shock. In those days Boston billed itself as *the* hub of culture which included the Cabots and Lodges and their associates. That dates me just a little bit if you know when those people had any influence in Boston. My husband suggested that I not keep mentioning how old I am, but I’m fifty years old. I’d like you to know that right to begin with. I think that lends some credence to my experiences. In our first Relief Society meeting in a little old house on Brattle

Street, I listened as a strong, faithful, wise woman (a long-time resident) implored us:

Now don't you Utah girls come here and hold your noses for four years wishing you were back in the only true West where things are done right! Absorb this wonderful culture. Learn New England cookery, get to know your Yankee neighbors; that may take some patience, but it's well worth it. Catholics are people. Take the subway over to the Esplanade and hear the Boston Symphony, free, this summer. Do it; then you, as well as your husbands, will have something to take home.

I believed her. It changed my responses. It has changed my life. When our four years were over, my husband brought home a Ph.D., and I came back loving New England: speech patterns, seafood, Catholics, and all. She taught me about differences and a most impressive lesson on tolerance. I learned that tolerance can lead to love—a lesson I was able to apply recently living among the Jews in Israel.

From Tolerance to Love

Tolerance leads to love. Most of our 30,000 missionaries serving throughout the world would bear testimony of that. As would the thousands who have returned. What an inspired program, sending us as missionaries all over the world where we confront personally different languages, often different dress, different customs, and different food. We arrive as strangers and foreigners, uncomfortable and very much aware of differences, but with a precious message of restored truth to deliver. That message motivates us to look beyond the differences, and, as we teach these strangers who they are, the children of our Heavenly Father, our own brothers and sisters in an eternal family, differences give way to kinship. Take for an example the last missionary you heard report—or the next one.

The positive effect of our worldwide commitment to missionary service is demonstrated

in my own family. My father served three years in Samoa. I grew up loving the Samoan people, their customs, their food, and their language. My brother served in Alaska. Our son served in Germany. Our daughter served in Argentina. My husband and I served in New England. We've also spent much time in Israel and had extended visits to Yugoslavia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. So in two generations my family has been all over the world, delivering a message but also bringing home a message of kinship and love for many peoples. Do you think Samoans, Alaskans, Germans, Argentines, Israelis, Yugoslavians, Chinese are welcome in our homes? I wish you could see in your mind's eye, as I can, dear Sini Salanoa, our Samoan brother, his first time away from his beloved islands, a half a world away, as he asked us in his broken English to "be his family" while he was stationed in Boston in 1953. Or beautiful, little, fourteen-year-old Julie Wang whom we met in K'Liao, a tiny fishing village in Taiwan. She described her encounters with our Heavenly Father, in her quiet Chinese manner. Her early prayers began, with sweet familiarity, "Hello, God, this is Julie Wang." When I heard her say that, I had the feeling that I was going to hear the response immediately. She taught me things about prayer that I had never known before. Or fine, spiritual, clear-eyed Gunther Mayer from Germany, who joined our family for scripture study on Sunday evenings all last year. They represent many who have enriched our lives. Somehow we see no divisive differences. Our commitment to the gospel becomes the great common denominator. We know whose we are, all of us.

Differences That Do Matter

That knowledge also helps us in relationships where there are differences that do matter. Some differences matter mightily. Such differences include those involving value, principle, truth, and the confirming religious

experience which we call testimony. Truth demands our allegiance, but to accept and love others, we need neither adopt their ideas nor be condescending. We can be strong in testimony, shining with that light which cannot be hid. When others differ from us in these essential matters, we must learn to see with eyes that separate people from their traditions and /or sins. Mistaken beliefs may be held by good people. Joseph Smith said, “It does not prove that a man is a bad man because he errs in Doctrine” (Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (eds.), *The Words of Joseph Smith* [Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980], p. 184).

Our daughter Mindy has become an expert at seeing people separate from their worldly overlay. She sees the good in a person where no one else seems able to recognize it. We were moved when she wrote home from Argentina early in her mission, “What an interesting eye-opener to realize, as a missionary, that the people you teach are better than you are”—a far cry from the innocent young elder who served with us in New England who hesitated to teach a family because the father smoked. We must learn to separate people from their failings.

Having truth in our possession, the knowing of righteous and true principles, does not automatically make us better people. Just because we have the truth available to us, we must not make the mistake of believing ourselves more righteous than others. It could have that effect, but it is living what we know, not knowing alone, that makes us better. Joseph Smith taught us:

All the religious world is boasting of righteousness: it is the doctrine of the devil to retard the human mind, and hinder our progress, by filling us with self-righteousness. The nearer we get to our Heavenly Father, the more we are disposed to look with compassion on perishing souls; we feel that we want to take them upon our shoulders and cast their sins behind our backs. . . . If you would have God

have mercy on you, have mercy on one another.
[*Teachings*, p. 241]

In another wise statement, the Prophet Joseph cautioned us, “The devil flatters us that we are very righteous, when we are feeding on the faults of others” (*Teachings*, p. 241). And in another place, “There is no salvation in believing an evil report against our neighbor” (Alma P. Burton (ed.), *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965], p. 203).

Are we strong enough in our own testimony and commitment to live the truths we know? Is it not sometimes our own weakness that frightens us into discounting others? Hugh Nibley has said with penetrating insight, “A shabby substitute for repentance is finding someone wickeder than oneself” (My notes on Hugh Nibley’s Isaiah lecture, Sperry Symposium, January 1978). It’s so true that it resonates.

Is it integrity to stand on a supposed height and play in our lives the game we played as children, “I am the man on Bunker Hill”—pushing and shoving down those around us—thinking in real life that somehow, if others are less, we are more?

What are we afraid of?

The truth is we are children of God, and our fellow beings in and out of the Church are our actual brothers and sisters. The gospel teaches us not to condemn those brothers and sisters for their weaknesses and sins but to show them by our lives how it is possible to escape sin through learning and living the truth, giving away our sins to know God.

We must secure our own testimonies by living the truths we have been given. Then we will not be frightened by our own lack of strength into prejudice and narrow-heartedness.

At the BYU Women’s Conference this year, Commissioner Hal Eyring gave a keynote address entitled “The Rope.” In it he suggested a powerful metaphor. We are like mountain

climbers. We are bound to each other as children of God. I thought as he spoke how the devil must laugh as we push each other down by our fault-finding criticism, our name-calling, our labeling, when part of our purpose in coming here was to learn to lift each other up.

Dangers in Negative Labeling

The temptation to label is ever present. Labeling shrinks our capacity for genuine understanding of and love for the people involved.

It seems to me it is dangerous to negatively label any person. Such labels often become indelible and nearly impossible to remove. I often think of the eleven-year-old boy I taught in Primary many years ago. He had been labeled “troublemaker, incorrigible,” but, as I came to know him, I found the labels were wrong. They should have been “bright, quick, ahead of everyone.” He had been bored because he knew all the answers. He had only to be challenged. Do we allow a brother or sister to change, to repent, or do we keep the label firmly in place—after it has become meaningless?

Some negative labels which can seriously wound and estrange are as follows: fat/skinny, feminine (if it’s a boy)/masculine (if it’s a girl), worldly/naïve—you’ll notice that some of these are exact opposites of each other. Yet, we label each other with opposites. If one is good, is the other bad? If one is bad, is the other good? Strange, isn’t it?—liberal/conservative, Utah Mormon/California Mormon, non-Mormon (some Presbyterian friends once told us they hated being referred to as non-Mormons. Think of it. How would you feel to be a Presbyterian—and be labeled as a *non-Mormon*? I promised them then I’d take time to mention a denomination rather than to lump everyone as non-us from then on), jack-Mormon, out of the Church, almost out of the Church, druggie, gentile—another word for other than Mormon, a confusing label when we have Jewish friends. We are gentiles to

them while they are gentiles to us. Most of them take that in very good spirits, but I can imagine that some would not because gentile to them is a much worse label than it is to us, partly, I suppose, because of what the gentiles have done to them historically—egghead/business man, white collar/blue collar.

And then there are the kinds of labels that are a little insidious that are just found in phrases that we use about each other. For instance, about the couple in your ward who are childless or who have only one or two children: “They must be selfish—they don’t have a large family.” I suffered under that one a little bit. We could not have any more children after our third, and it always hurt me in meetings to hear people refer to their nine and ten children and then to ask me how many children I had with a look in their eye that told me they wondered why I didn’t have more. I wondered why I didn’t have more, too. No one ever prayed any harder or wanted children any more than I did. The label was difficult for me at times.

I’m sure that you could add to this list. This list could go on for pages and pages, but there isn’t time for that. Think sometimes when you refer to other people in your life, “Am I labeling? Am I putting on them a burden that they don’t deserve?”

Note how labels polarize and pull people apart. Each of these labels can be used as a put-down and will effectively block further understanding of the persons involved as related members of an eternal family.

Positive labeling may have its advantages, but let’s try to look at people without negative labels, leaving everyone room to change and improve, even ourselves. Sometimes the labels we attach to ourselves are the hardest to remove: “I’m just shy, or dumb, or thoughtless, or forgetful, or hot-tempered, or useless.” You can add to the list. It isn’t hard to think of the negative things that you label yourself. It is a

little harder sometimes to think of the positive that you can supply for your own strength.

Such put-downs make me my own worst enemy—when surely, as I seek salvation, I need all the help I can get, and I can't expect others to encourage me if I won't even encourage myself. Why not be your own best friend?

Our need for Each Other

We are like climbers. "Man must live on the summit to avoid the abyss," said Abraham Joshua Heschel (*The Prophets*, vol. 1 [New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1969], p. 16). We must move ever higher but not stepping on others to get our footing. The moment we've found a handhold or foothold of truth, we must mark it well and reach out to those behind or below that they may find it, too. Remember what Joseph Smith said:

The nearer we get to our Heavenly Father, the more we are disposed to look with compassion on perishing souls; we feel that we want to take them upon our shoulders and cast their sins behind our backs.

That is the way of Christ. Can we learn His responses? Did He distance himself from sinners?

In addressing the Relief Society on June 9, 1842, Joseph Smith said:

Christ said he came to call sinners to repentance, to save them. Christ was condemned by the self-righteous Jews because He took sinners into His society: He took them upon the principle that they repented of their sins. It is the object of this society to reform persons, not to take those that are corrupt and foster them in their wickedness: But if they repent, we are bound to take them, and by kindness, sanctify and cleanse them from all unrighteousness by our influence in watching over them. . . . Nothing is so much calculated to lead people to forsake sin as to take them by the hand and watch over them with tenderness. [Teachings, p. 240]

Recently I heard of an excommunicated man who stormed out of his Church court bitter and unrepentant. Many of us, if we had been in that court, would have said, "Good. He'll have time now to make his peace." And we would have thought, "Good riddance." One of the high councilors present that night spent three evenings a week for the next several years visiting this man until, mellowed, repentant, and regenerated, he was reinstated in the Church. As the Prophet Joseph Smith has said, "Nothing is so much calculated to lead people to forsake sin as to take them by the hand and watch over them with tenderness."

What should my response be to the excommunicant, recent or of long-standing? Or the young unwed mother? Or the Mormon boy, or any boy, of missionary age fighting a drug or alcohol problem? Interestingly enough, these examples are taken out of my own experience, and I am sure out of yours. You can all find people in each of these categories and many others. Why not this response from Isaiah 1:18–19?

Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. . . .

If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land.

It is one of the most beautiful messages of the gospel and sometimes a well-kept secret.

And what is your response upon meeting a Catholic, a Jew, a Moslem, a Hindu, a Jehovah's Witness? I just have to stop to say this. Two young, beautiful Jehovah's Witnesses knocked on our cabin door last week. You have to understand that our cabin is far off the beaten track. As I was preparing this address, they knocked on the door. And you'd be surprised what my response was—or maybe you wouldn't be surprised. I've learned a lot by thinking on these things. What would your response be

on meeting an atheist brother or sister? Could we apply the counsel given to Lyman Sherman in D&C 108:7?

Therefore, strengthen your brethren in all your conversation, in all your prayers, in all your exhortations, and in all your doings.

It always amazes me how the scriptures and the prophets use the word *all*. It doesn't leave much room for exceptions.

Our Enemies

But lastly, what of those who define themselves our enemies? For example, those who wear away their lives publishing and promoting anti-Mormon materials? The scriptures are clear: we must pray for them. Do we instead, in the face of organized opposition, mount our high horse to return jab for jab, becoming (if you'll pardon the label) an anti-anti-Mormon, spending our strength jousting abroad while the cause of truth begs for champions and the positive work of the kingdom waits? Our charge is to teach the nations, and, even if they reject our teachings, the love we have extended should never be withdrawn. Our ultimate response to those who suppose themselves to be our enemies must be to love them. I remember at this point when the Savior said, "By this

shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). Otherwise, how will we be recognized by those not of our faith?

If we can learn patience, allowing all men the same privilege of seeking truth at their own pace, we will have moved measurably toward the compassion and love of the Savior, who saw no enemies among His crucifiers. His example stands for all time to teach us the tender path from tolerance to compassion and perfect love. With every provocation to rage against His adversaries, He said rather, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32), thus offering Himself on our behalf, that we might have room to repent.

Can we do less for our Father's farflung family?

It is my testimony that the people of the world are our brothers and sisters. Whether they understand what we believe, we can understand what they believe, and we can be a bright example of testimony, and they can, just by knowing us, feel the love that we have learned to give freely in the way that the Savior taught us. I pray that we may have the courage and the strength and the testimony to do that, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.