

Whatever We Ought to Be, We Better Be Becoming

ROBERT E., HELEN, AND SHARLENE WELLS

Helen Wells

As the mother of such a lovely daughter, it is impossible for me to express in the English language, or even in the Spanish language (which is a more beautiful, flowery language), how I really feel this night. I hope that you can try to imagine a little bit of what I'm feeling.

I don't want to take away from Sharlene's time, but I do want to share with you two aspects of this many-faceted personality that is our daughter. There are many attributes that Sharlene has that have helped her be the contributive person that she is.

Sharlene has always set goals, and I think if she were speaking in my place she would say, "Whatever we ought to be, we better be becoming, and whatever we ought to be doing, we better be doing it." As a family we see this in Sharlene. She has always been this way, a very curious person, a person desirous of knowing as much as she can as quickly as she can. As her life bespeaks, she would say, "Set goals and follow them." She would say, "Plan your direction because direction is important." She would say, "Decisions are important. Make wise ones."

Another lesson that Sharlene has internalized early in her life is that a person may be tolerant without compromising herself or her

own traditions, background, beliefs, convictions, or habits of life. She has truly exemplified this. Tolerance without compromising truth, sound principles, or fundamentals is one of the great needs of today.

We are very proud that Sharlene stands up for what she believes to be true. She is tolerant of all peoples. She has been raised, as I like to say of all of our children, color blind, which doesn't mean she can't distinguish between colors with her eyes, but that she sees no difference in color of skin, race, creed, culture, or religious background. She is tolerant of all peoples but never compromises truth, sound principles, or fundamentals.

She is an instigator of righteousness and it certainly is a privilege, an honor, and a great blessing to be her mother.

I bear my testimony that I know that what she radiates and what she believes is what we all should radiate and what we should in-

Sharlene Wells was a BYU student and reigning Miss America when this fireside address was given at Brigham Young University on 26 October 1984. She was joined by her mother, Helen Wells, and her father, Elder Robert E. Wells of the First Quorum of the Seventy.

ternalize as our beliefs. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Robert E. Wells

My dear brothers and sisters and friends of Sharlene, I'm grateful that Paul has given a perfect scripture for this occasion. I'm reading from 1 Corinthians 9:23–26: Paul explains, "And this I do for the gospel's sake." And to a very large degree I like to think that Sharlene is doing this [the role of Miss America] partly because of a spiritual motivation behind it all. Paul goes on to say,

Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain [the prize or the crown]. And every man [every woman, of course] that striveth . . . do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we [seek] an incorruptible [crown]. [1 Corinthians 9:24–25]

Paul was talking about the difference between the honors of men, temporal, worldly things that may not last too long, versus those things of eternal value. He was talking about exaltation and eternal life. He was talking about spiritual values, eternal values, a different kind of crown. He goes on to say, "I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air" (1 Corinthians 9:26). In other words, he is really going to go for it, for those eternal principles.

Now, carrying this illustration just a little bit further, I like to use the example that anyone who competes in this kind of competition, the scholarship-pageant competition, does so in the same sense that an Olympic athlete competes in a pentathlon.

Let me mention the events. The first is, of course, the judges' interview, in which the candidates are judged on their ability to articulate, to communicate, to think on their feet, to respond with their own opinions and feelings about things, and to project a warm, pleasant personality. The second part is the talent event.

The judges are looking at the years of study required and for the ability to present oneself exceptionally well on a stage before many people. Then there is the physical fitness section of it. And there is an evening gown, feminine graces section of it. These are the four recognized events.

I feel (this is a personal feeling, certainly I'm not reflecting the pageant, I'm reflecting what I think was part of it as a Church leader and as a father of one of the contestants) there was a fifth category of spirituality, of virtue—of those things that when we talk about crowns, when I say being a queen in Israel, you know what I am talking about. I believe that was an element, a degree that is difficult to explain and difficult to talk about. But the judges were not really aware of that. After the crowning I was asked what I thought about this and I said that I thought the judges were looking for this kind of a young lady. It turns out that the judges never said that they were looking for a spiritual, virtuous young lady. They said they were impressed with many of the other qualities.

I still feel there was a spiritual element. I'll tell you why. I have a final scripture to use, It is Moroni 7:29.

And because he hath done this, my beloved brethren, have miracles ceased? Behold I say unto you, Nay; neither have angels ceased to minister unto the children of men.

When I gave Sharlene a father's blessing before she left home, I did not bless her to win. I blessed her that she would do her best. I blessed her physically, spiritually, and emotionally to do her very best. In the prayer I even mentioned her harp, that the strings wouldn't break and that the wood wouldn't crack because we had had that kind of problem in the past. I also blessed her that angels would attend her because I believe that angels do minister to the children of men.

After the crowning, when Sister Wells and I met Sharlene for a brief embrace before she rushed off to the interview with the press, she whispered as she hugged me, "Daddy, as my fingers touched the strings for the first chord, I felt like angels were with me." I think angels might have been there with the judges, too.

My dear brothers and sisters, I leave you my testimony. I leave my prayer and blessing on each and everyone here that all of us will have goals and ambitions looking toward eternal crowns of being kings and queens in Israel, incorruptible crowns in Zion.

I close by testifying that our Heavenly Father is in His heaven. He loves us, He hears our prayers, He answers them. I testify that Jesus the Christ, our Lord and Savior, lives. He lives, resurrected, glorified, exalted, standing physically at the head of this Church which bears His name. His spokesman here on the earth is a living prophet, our beloved President Kimball. Everything that we stand for, that Sharlene stands for, and everything that we believe about the premortal existence, the reason of this earth life, this time of mortal probation, the second coming, the life to come, is true. I testify of it humbly in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sharlene Wells

When they told me that I was speaking, I thought, "Okay, if I were you, what would I want to hear from me." Probably, how in the world did I get here? I've asked myself that question many times and I think what I've come up with is I've always been very aware of opportunities. At the same time I've also been aware that the Lord must have some great purpose for me because He has blessed me a great deal with a family that is so supportive, with opportunities running into me, almost. I had to decide that I was not going to turn down any opportunities because I was either nervous or busy. Those are poor excuses in my book. So I had to take advantage of any opportunity

because of the great sense of duty and responsibility that I felt to the Lord.

Maybe I could share with you some of those experiences and opportunities that I feel have prepared me for this position. When I was in South America the second time—many of you know that I have spent about eleven years there—I was about thirteen and in the eighth grade. I had my first encounter with what being "different" meant. Down there they don't date, they "go with someone." Here I was, only thirteen, and this young man approached me and asked, "Will you go with me?" I was so naive I replied, "Where?" Needless to say, that was the last time I ever was asked out while I was down there!

At first I was on the defensive when people would call me "goody-goody." Now I have learned to take it with a sense of humor. I was very much on the defensive until I realized that a sense of humor can smooth over anything. So the next time one of the boys would come up to me and kid me about being goody-goody (Remember those Goody-Goody combs? Well, back then, in eighth grade, they used those combs.), and if he had one of those combs, I would say, "See, you're not so bad yourself." Then he would say, "Okay, okay, I get what you mean." They didn't tease me anymore once I decided that I was not going to be on the defensive.

When I was on the "David Letterman Show" and he insinuated that I don't have fun because I don't drink, I said, "Oh, I drink—milk, water, juice, and 7-up, etc." Then we got on to other things; we didn't dwell on the fact that I'm not having "fun" by the world's standards.

While I was in South America, there were only a few of us in high school from the States who were members of the Church—my sisters, the mission president's sons, and a couple of others. We were always invited to the weekly school parties that they had down there and of course there were many activities going on.

There was beer and smoking, but we learned that, yes, we could condemn the action, but it didn't mean we had to condemn the people. We still loved our friends. So we would go to the parties as long as they provided the Sprite for us and then we would leave when they started to get a little boring. We would just say, "You guys are boring, we're taking off now. We're going to have our own party." We learned being different doesn't matter, we can still have fun. So now when I have to go to cocktail parties, it doesn't bother me in the slightest to raise up my glass of water in a toast. Nobody thinks to make fun of me. Sure, it might be strange by the world's standards, but as long as we are not apologetic about it, it is quite all right.

Fitting In

Another one of my challenges was moving often. We moved many times throughout my childhood. At first it was hard because I didn't fit in—I was different. I remember when we first moved up here to the United States when I was seven. Nobody wanted to hear about South America, and that was of course my only background. It was hard to fit into elementary school. Then we moved again and it was hard to fit into the cliques on the other side of the city. Then we moved back down to South America. I think it was down there that I finally decided that in order for me to fit in wherever I go, I have to first fit in with myself. I have to be completely confident of myself and then I can have a great time. I think at that time I didn't understand why I was not fitting in, and now I do. Now I realize that because I'm so interested in different kinds of people, as I travel across the country, in some small way I can relate to people of all different backgrounds. I have not just fit in with one clique.

Then, of course, there was coming to college—BYU. But before I get into that, I was in Boston just this last week when Boston College dropped to eleventh and BYU went to fourth in

the football polls. I was very proud to be from BYU and I found it hard to keep from gloating. While I was signing autographs a man came up to me and said, "I feel really bad about Boston College dropping to eleventh, but if it had to be another university, I'm glad it is a university such as Brigham Young University." Then he left. That made me feel really good. I didn't feel so bad about gloating anymore.

I was fairly confident in high school about what I could do, about my talents, about what I could accomplish as a person. Then I got to college and I thought there was no way I could compete at a college level. I was one against a million. It took me my first year here to realize that we are all one against a million, which makes us all equal and at the same time very individualistic with regard to talents and skills and abilities. But we all have exactly the same advantages.

Young Ambassadors

My second year I decided I would tryout for Young Ambassadors. It was kind of presumptuous of me since I had never danced before in my life. I thought I would just tryout as a singer. That was how much I knew about Young Ambassadors. You have to do *everything* in Young Ambassadors, including technical responsibilities such as setting up mikes.

I went into the audition room and was handed a microphone, just about the first time I had ever held one. I was expected to sing, so I did. I didn't think I would make callbacks, so my roommate who was there, had to call me and say, "Get down here, you made callbacks."

I asked, "Well, what do I have to do? Do I have to sing another song?"

"No," she said, "you have to dance."

I said, "Oh boy, I better just quit right here." She insisted, "No, get down here."

So I showed up in my jeans, tennies, and sweatshirt for dance auditions. Well, some kind soul came up to me and said she had a pair of sweats I could borrow. Another said she had a

cutoff sweatshirt I could borrow—which I did. So, I show up on the dance floor with my sweats and tennies and cutoff sweatshirt and everyone else is in leotards and tights and jazz pants and jazz shoes, looking like they came out of “Fame,” and here I am out of *Rocky*. Needless to say, I forgot half the dance, but I remembered something—as long as you keep smiling, maybe they’ll forget the rest of the body. It must have worked. I think ninety percent of it was inspiration on the part of Randy and Dee. They knew that I needed this. And then maybe ten percent was that they thought I had potential. After looking over my resume they asked me, “Haven’t you ever had any dance experience?” I said, “No, but I’ve always been very involved in sports. Does that count?” Maybe they thought it did.

I learned so much about this group and how much impact this group can have worldwide and how much impact even one individual can have. I also learned that there is no room for the word *tired*. After eight shows in one day in Waukegan, Illinois, we had our final show, a two-hour special with seventeen costume changes. We’re supposed to be peppy, jumping off the stage and going into the audience and greeting people for about half an hour. The only thing that makes it worthwhile—not the only thing, but one of the main things—is when someone comes up and says, “It is so great to see young people who have a purpose in life and who can show it through their music.” It is also exciting when a missionary runs up all excited and says, “Our family has just committed to baptism!”

I kept that in mind, that there is no room for being tired. Right after I won the Miss America Pageant I had to get up at 4:00 in the morning and go to CBS and ABC and NBC and then right after that to a couple of press conferences where they asked me the same questions about Vanessa and my squeaky-clean image and I had to come up with all sorts of creative answers so that I didn’t get bored. Of course,

each appearance required me to be in different outfits. That is a challenge, pulling clothes out of a suitcase that look like opponents after a BYU football game and trying to make them look presentable. Then I attended the opening of a restaurant where the only things I could understand on the menu were escargot, duck liver, and chocolate mousse. So what do I pick? The chocolate mousse! Then I went to a cocktail party where some people were not quite sober. But one sober man came up and said, “When I learned that you were Mormon, I knew you stood for everything right.” That was fulfilling for me. It made the whole day worthwhile—that I can stand for something right and represent what all of you stand for in a way which you would be proud of.

Learning a Lot

Yes, I have learned a lot from Randy and the Young Ambassadors. They have taught me a lot about sharing my assurance, my confidence—not on a soapbox, but rather with actions and commitments. Integrity is only sustained by commitment. There are other groups of friends and influential people that, of course, I want to thank. I’m quite a people watcher. I look at all these different people who have influenced my life and I try to pick out at least one thing from each that I want to emulate. For instance, my sister Elayne is quite a journal keeper. That has influenced me. I take that aspect and say to myself, “I can keep up my journal if she can,” although she is the 4.0 Stanford student.

I learned a lot from my South American friends. I learned that I should differentiate between the actions and the person. Never condemn anyone because they smoke or drink. They are just as much a human being as I am, although I may not condone their actions.

Then there are all my secular and ecclesiastical leaders and teachers, not to mention my voice, piano, and harp teachers who have all worked with me and not tried to create

anything. They have worked with my raw materials, which I really appreciate because I'm not one to be molded. If anyone is going to do the molding, I want to do it, and the Lord can. But I love to learn from everyone.

I'm also thankful to all those people in the pageants with whom I have been involved. I learned a lot about service through those pageants—titles are not fame and glory. It is a lot of hard work. It is a lot of service.

Also, I want to thank special friends such as Janice and Robin and LeAnne—they know who they are—my roommates, friends who have stuck with me, and of course all of you out there with whom I have associated. I have great regard for those of you who have taught me a lot. I keep you in mind all the time and for this reason: seventy-five percent of my confidence has come from you, my peers, because that is really what means the most to me. My family is biased, so I can't really draw my confidence from them, although there is a great amount of support there. But when it comes from my peers, that is what means the most to me.

Again, of course, the Young Ambassadors, my second family, helped me greatly. Besides teaching me what the word impact means, they have also taught me what the word diet means. A few months ago, while on tour, right before the Miss Utah Pageant, Randy came up to me on the bus and asked, "Are you on a diet?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, you should be thinking of one." So then I had to decide which had more calories, the chocolate pudding or the chocolate cake. That was hard.

He Didn't Raise His Voice, He Intensified It

Now to another special group and that is my family. I recently received a letter from one of my parent's missionaries when my dad was mission president. This is what he says about my dad: "His teaching was always done with composed patience. You often behaved well for him because you knew he expected you to

behave and you didn't want to disappoint him. He understands women so well that he usually defers to your mother until and unless he wants to make a point. He did not raise his voice, he intensified it. His love always seemed unreserved and always abundant." That is one thing that I've learned from my dad, not to raise my voice, but to intensify it. I see myself doing that in press conferences whenever there is something that jumps out, especially with regard to my principles. That is when I intensify my voice and speak with assurance because he has taught me that.

Also there is my mom—I have to refer to her as the air traffic controller of the family, especially with three younger daughters. When we were in South America we had one piano and all three of us had to practice at least half an hour before school. We had to get up at 5:30 to accomplish this. It has really been a challenge, I'm sure, for my mom to schedule all of our comings and goings. I appreciate her for everything she has done. I feel it would be more appropriate for her to be wearing the crown than myself. She has really been the wall, and myself, the grapevine.

I have to thank my supportive family, my sisters who always show up at whatever I'm doing and who have the talents to challenge me and to keep me on my toes.

And most important, I have to thank my Creator. I have been blessed so much, not only with a firm belief in who I am and my purpose in life, but also with my family and the opportunities I spoke of before. Just recently we were flying back from Hawaii, going to Chicago, and we were coming from the sunset, so we were travelling through the night. As I looked out the window, there were these stars just absolutely beautiful with the moon and no cloud cover because we were above the clouds, and every now and then I could see the earth below. It prompted me to think about the potential that I have, that we all have, to be looking down on an earth someday. It

magnified my responsibility on earth right now because I have a lot at stake later on.

“If I But Learn to Do His Will”

I received a letter from a friend just recently and she summed up exactly what I feel in this short paragraph: “It is one thing, of course, to be chosen as an individual to represent a city and state. It is quite another to represent the kingdom of God in such a visible and vulnerable way. The responsibility is infinitely greater but so is the sense of satisfaction, knowing that much higher purposes are being fulfilled. I would so much rather be a little tool in God’s hands than a luminary on my own. I find it lots more fun.”

That is exactly the way I feel. I feel like that is what I am right now—a tool in God’s hands—that that’s what I have been prepared for. We all know the song “I Am a Child of God” (*Sing with Me*, B-76). To me the phrase “If I but learn to do His will” is the key to everything. Everything will fall into place if we learn to allow ourselves to be guided.

I want to leave you with my testimony. Our Father does live and His son Jesus Christ was sent to this earth for our sake and we owe him a great deal for what we are and what we can become. I know I do. I leave these things with you in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.