

A Safe Place

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When we moved to Provo thirty years ago, I was in my twenties. Our oldest son was two, and our youngest son was just a few weeks old. I had been a member of the Church for less than ten years.

Shortly after arriving in Provo, I met Bertha. Bertha was in her sixties. I knew a little bit about Bertha. I knew she lived in our stake. I knew she was respected by those who knew her. I also knew that she was a leader and a woman of service. People sought her advice.

I remember attending a stake Relief Society function at which Bertha was one of the women on a panel that was answering questions and giving advice to those in attendance on a variety of topics. I noticed that Bertha was being asked for a lot of advice about raising children. I soon discovered why. She was the mother of thirteen children. I appreciated her responses to the questions. She seemed to have all the wisdom and experience that I lacked.

Another thing I knew about Bertha was that she seemed to like walking. Sometimes I would see her walking in the neighborhood. One morning while I was walking with my friend, she asked me if it would be okay if Bertha joined us occasionally on our walks. I told her that was fine. But privately, the thought of walking with Bertha

intimidated me somewhat, mainly because I held her in such high esteem.

A few days later my friend invited Bertha to walk with us. Before Bertha met us for our walk that morning, my friend told me a couple of things about Bertha that she thought would be helpful to me. She told me that Bertha sometimes had a little difficulty hearing and that her shins sometimes bothered her—especially when walking uphill. I thought these things were good to know.

Our walking route that day began in the Tree Streets south of the Provo Temple. We headed toward the temple, which is a steady uphill walk. I don't remember much of our conversation that day. I remember only the question I asked Bertha once we reached the top of the road by the temple and began our steady descent toward home.

Remembering that Bertha's shins sometimes bothered her, I asked, "Bertha, how are your shins?"

There was a bit of an awkward pause, and then, with much earnestness, Bertha replied, "I'm working on them, and hopefully they are improving every day."

Peggy S. Worthen, wife of BYU president Kevin J. Worthen, delivered this devotional address on January 10, 2017.

I responded, “Oh, that’s good. Thankfully it’s all downhill from here.”

I was feeling pretty magnanimous about my expressed concern for Bertha. For a couple of minutes we walked along in a somewhat awkward silence.

Then my friend suddenly got a relieved look on her face and, turning to me, exclaimed, “You said *shins*, didn’t you?”

My first thought was, “Yes, of course I said *shins*.” Then it occurred to me that they had both thought I had asked Bertha how her *sins* were doing!

I was mortified! There I was, this inexperienced young mother, asking Bertha, this accomplished and wise woman, how her sins were doing! How impertinent I must have seemed, especially to have commented that it’s all downhill from here—as if implying that once you hit a certain age, it can only be downhill.

I really don’t know what Bertha thought of me. I do know that I was grateful that my friend clarified the misunderstanding that I had unintentionally caused.

That experience and many others like it have taught me the critical importance of effective communication. Our ability to communicate with one another is one of the most important aspects of our lives.

In Ether 1:33–37 we see that the importance of communication was understood by the brother of Jared. “At the time [when] the Lord confounded the language of the people” (verse 33), the brother of Jared cried unto the Lord so that He would not confound the language of his family and friends. The brother of Jared realized that effective communication was vital to the on-going well-being of his people.

The BYU mission statement emphasizes the importance of clear communication. It states that a BYU education should “help students . . . communicate effectively.”¹ My New Year’s plea for you is that you emphasize this part of your education this year.

Effective communication is essential to many aspects of your university life. This past semester I attended one of the Eternal Family religion courses. One of the class sections was on dating. One day the professor conducted a live, in-class survey. The questions focused on what the students would like to change about their dating experiences and what they appreciated about those experiences. The majority of the responses related to communication.

Here are some of the things the students, both men and women, wanted to change:

- They wanted their dates to be better at communicating.
- They wanted their dates to sincerely listen and show that they were interested in them.
- They wanted their dates to put away their cell phones.
- They wanted their dates to express their feelings better.
- They wanted their dates to be patient with them when they were having difficulty expressing their own feelings.

Here are some of the things the students appreciated about their dating experiences:

- When their dates would communicate clearly with them.
- When their dates would listen sincerely to them.
- When their dates would show that they were interested in them.
- When their dates would put away their cell phones.
- When their dates would show patience with them when they were having difficulty expressing themselves.

In sum, what the students wished they could change and what they appreciated were mirror images of each other. They wished their dates communicated better, and they appreciated the times when they communicated well.

Of course there were comments that related to things other than communication. For example, one man commented that he liked it when his dates didn't "check out" his roommates. Another said that he liked it when his dates complimented his muscles. But by far the most commented upon topic—for good or ill—was communication.² Communication is the key to all successful relationships, including in dating and marriage.

Let me provide three simple suggestions to help us increase our ability to communicate effectively:

First, we should learn how to listen more closely and pay more attention to what is being said, even if that means putting away our cell phones. Listening is a skill that is not easily developed, and being in a university setting sometimes makes it more difficult.

S. I. Hayakawa, the former president of San Francisco State College and a former United States senator, made this astute observation:

*Few people . . . have had much training in listening. The training of most oververbalized professional intellectuals is in the opposite direction. Living in a competitive culture, most of us are most of the time chiefly concerned with getting our own views across, and we tend to find other people's speeches a tedious interruption of the flow of our own ideas. Hence, it is necessary to emphasize that listening does not mean simply maintaining a polite silence while you are rehearsing in your mind the speech you are going to make the next time you can grab a conversational opening. Nor does listening mean waiting alertly for the flaws in the other [person's] arguments so that later you can mow [the speaker] down. Listening means trying to see the problem the way the speaker sees it—which means not sympathy, which is **feeling for** [the speaker], but empathy, which is **experiencing with** [the speaker]. Listening requires entering actively and imaginatively into the other [person's] situation and trying to understand a frame of reference different from your own. This is not always an easy task.*

But a good listener does not merely remain silent. [A good listener] asks questions. However, these questions must avoid all implications . . . of skepticism or

*challenge or hostility. They must clearly be motivated by curiosity about the speaker's views.*³

We will all communicate more effectively if we concentrate more on what *others* are saying and less on what *we* plan to say.

Second, we should make sure that we are considerate of those who are communicating with us and of the impact our words and expressions have on them. A friend shared an experience she had with one of her former mission companions. Since their mission they had seen each other occasionally. On one of these occasions, the mission companion confided in my friend about the difficulties she was facing with one of her children and the trial and heartache this experience created.

In the course of the conversation, the mission companion asked my friend what her greatest heartache was. My friend, feeling that she could safely share her thoughts and feelings about her greatest heartache, proceeded to tell her mission companion about the heartache she was currently facing with one of her own children. Instead of responding with the expected empathy and understanding, the mission companion immediately was critical of my friend, judging her and her situation with harshness.

My friend was surprised and shocked, to say the least, at her companion's response—especially since it was the mission companion who had asked the question in the first place. My friend thought that she was in "a safe place" while relating her experience to her former mission companion, but instead she found herself exposed to criticism and harsh judgment with no empathy or understanding.

While there is some disagreement about the role of safe places for public discourse on college campuses, personal communication is best accomplished in an environment in which both participants feel they are in a private, safe place—one in which thoughts and opinions can be expressed without hostile responses.

Third, we need to remember that our most important communication is with our Heavenly

Father. Not only will He listen to our prayers and answer them when we ask for His help, but He will teach us through His example how to become better listeners and communicators. He is a careful and empathetic listener. Our communications with Him are safe. And He can help us develop the skills we need to communicate effectively.

That we may follow His example in this and all aspects is my hope, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. *The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* (Provo: BYU, 2014), 2.

2. See BYU course taught by Gaylamarie Rosenberg, RelC 200, The Eternal Family, catalog.byu.edu/religious-education/church-history-and-doctrine/eternal-family.

3. Samuel I. Hayakawa, “How to Listen to Other People,” in *Symbol, Status, and Personality* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963), 32–33; emphasis in original.