

Respecting Agency—A Small but Very Important Thing

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*This address was given at the BYU Family
Expo Conference, April 3–4, 2006.*

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The theme of the conference is taken from Alma 37:6 “. . . by small and simple things are great things brought to pass . . .”

The verse following adds this: . . . “and by very small means the Lord doth confound the wise and bringeth about the salvation of many souls.”

Bringing about the salvation of our Father’s children is the purpose of this life. Obedience is an essential ingredient in obtaining salvation. The Lord explained to Abraham, “And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (Abraham 3:25).

In the grand councils of heaven, Satan proposed an alternate plan for this world, as explained in the book of Moses: “. . . he [Satan] came before me, saying—Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor” (Moses 4:1).

The idea of saving everyone as Satan proposed may seem attractive, but ponder

President Kimball's description of life under Satan's plan:

Had the rebels won that great war you and I would have been in a totally different position. Ours would have been a life under force. You could make no decisions. You would have to comply. Every determination would be made for you regardless of your will. Under compulsion you would do the bidding of your dictator leader in whose image the Khrushchevs, Hitlers, Napoleons, and Alexanders were but poor and ineffectual novices in comparison. Your life would be cut out for you and you would fit into the mold made for you, (Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, edited by Edward L. Kimball, p. 33).

Agency is absolutely central to our ability to learn and to make correct choices making it possible to return to our Heavenly Father. Satan's alternative would never have worked.

To Adam and Eve the Lord emphasized the agency of their children and commanded them to teach them in these words: "And it is given unto them to know good from evil; wherefore they are agents unto themselves, . . ." wherefore teach it unto your children, that all men, everywhere, must repent, or they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God . . ." (Moses 6:56–57).

It is clear from the Old Testament that many of Adam and Eve's posterity failed to follow their righteous example.

After King Benjamin's powerful final discourse to his people recorded in the Book of Mormon, the response of his people was dramatic.

And they all cried with one voice, saying: Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us; and also, we know of their surety and truth, because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually (Mosiah 5:2).

They further stated: "And we are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command us, all the remainder of our days . . ." (Mosiah 5:5).

King Benjamin had taught them to teach their children in these words: [neither]

will ye suffer that they transgress the laws of God, . . . but ye will teach them to walk in the ways of truth and soberness; ye will teach them to love one another, and to serve one another” (Mosiah 4: 14–15).

It is somewhat sad to read the following a few chapters later:

Now it came to pass that there were many of the rising generation that could not understand the words of king Benjamin, being little children at the time he spake unto his people; and they did not believe the tradition of their fathers. They did not believe what had been said concerning the resurrection of the dead, neither did they believe concerning the coming of Christ. And now because of their unbelief they could not understand the word of God; and their hearts were hardened. And they would not be baptized; neither would they join the church (Mosiah 26:1–4).

Clearly in some of the Nephite families the faith of the parents had not been successfully transferred on to their children.

Contrast this with the faith of the sons of Helaman, the children of Lamanite converts. Their courage was extraordinary in the face of going into battle as recorded in Alma:

Now they never had fought, yet they did not fear death; . . . yea, they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them. And they rehearsed unto me the words of their mothers, saying: We do not doubt our mothers knew it (Alma 56:47–48).

These faithful mothers had been very effective transferring their faith to these sons.

In our day the Lord emphasizes parental responsibility in these words.

And again, inasmuch as parents have children in Zion, or in any of her stakes which are organized, that teach them not to understand the doctrine of repentance, faith in Christ the Son of the living God, and of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of the hands, when eight years old, the sin be upon the heads of the parents (D&C 68:25).

Notice the admonition is to teach, not to compel.

Any experienced parent understands there is no exact recipe that guarantees every child will always do as the parent wishes. But in our desire to be certain that our children make no major errors, we can be tempted to use methods which violate the principle of agency. There is a fine line between effective parenting and unrighteous coercion. When that line is crossed, the child may stubbornly rebel to demonstrate that he still has his agency.

As children grow up, it is essential they learn the gospel and, more importantly, internalize the gospel so that they have their own testimony and their own feelings of love and trust in the Lord who cares about His children and hears and answer prayers. The challenge is to give children increasing latitude as they mature and demonstrate they are trustworthy so that they are prepared to be responsible adults. A practical example of the challenges faced by parents of small children trying to teach the principle of the fast was recently shared with us by one of our daughters. I quote:

Gavin . . . has struggled a bit with this principle as he is slight of build and gets very hungry. He is 9 years old. I have encouraged but not forced him to fast. . . . He gets a lot of peer pressure from Clarissa (two years older) who thinks he should be able to fast without making a fuss, as she started fasting when she was much younger than he is. I always explain to Gavin that he can choose how long to fast, as I don't want this to be a negative experience for him. I encourage him to pray about how long he should fast, and to do what he feels he should do, with the Lord's help. In the past few months he has chosen to do a full fast with us, but it has been hard on him physically, and often he eats something a bit earlier than we do. On Saturday evening when the kids had all gone to bed fasting, I got the message . . . were having a family fast for (a member of our extended family). . . . That night I pleaded with the Lord to bless Gavin that he would have a positive experience fasting, as I wanted his testimony of fasting to grow. When the kids awoke on Sunday morning, I explained to them about our (special) family fast . . . and thanked them for being part of it.

. . . .When we had all been fasting nearly 24 hours, Gavin came downstairs to the kitchen with a happy skip and said, "Mom, I don't know why, but this time fasting has been so much easier for me. I haven't been that hungry or

anything.”

The fast would go a little over 24 hours because of late arrival of guests, but when his mother offered to allow him to eat something, he refused, saying:

“That's OK, mommy, I want to wait until we say the prayer. I can wait,”
The Lord had answered my prayers to help Gavin have an easier time fasting.

E-mail from Kathleen Oaks McLaren, March 6, 2006

There is no amount of force that could have effectively written the principle of the fast into the heart of this child, but by being empowered to make choices for himself with some direction from his mother, he is on his way towards a testimony of fasting.

This is an example of the small and simple things done regularly in the homes of parents who are teaching their children using methods which are generally effective and consistent with the gospel of love.

Will children always do everything correctly if taught properly by their parents?
That would be quite unusual!

I had a mother who was widowed when I was four, my older brother nearly eight and our younger sister age one. Mother was a very good teacher and a very loving mother, but it was challenging to raise her children alone. Her techniques might be considered small and simple, but they were powerful. She trusted us, and praised us for everything good that we did. It was difficult to disappoint a mother who had so much confidence in us.

Did we grow up as children who always did what we should? NO! I remember vividly an episode when my brother and I were in our teen years and beginning to question and exert a little more independence. We decided we wanted to do a certain activity on Sunday which was not within the standards that our mother had taught us. Mother told us not to do it and the more she resisted, the more we insisted. Finally, seeing that she could not dissuade us, she said, “Then go, but not with my blessing.”

We went on our activity with a feeling of exhilaration at our independence and then had an absolutely miserable time. Our mother's teachings were deeply in our hearts and the Spirit made it abundantly clear to both of us that "wickedness never was happiness," although wickedness is probably too strong a term for our one time transgression. Neither of us have been seriously tempted to break the Sabbath since that experience.

President Hinckley's biography by Sheri Dew is a rich source of the small and simple things involved in the teaching by his parents which were important to him as he was growing up to be the strong, righteous person we all love and respect as our prophet:

Though Bryant [his father Bryant S. Hinckley] sermonized from the pulpit, there was very little preaching around the house. But he was a storyteller and an avid reader of biography and history, and he had a knack for extracting inspiring examples from the lives of those he studied and referring to them when occasion warranted. (Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley*, p. 43.)

In 1915 President Joseph F. Smith recommended families hold home evening one evening each week. The Hinckleys announced the new program to the family.

This pronouncement was greeted with moans from children who weren't anxious to be corralled into another meeting, but from that time forward Monday evenings were reserved for family. Bryant or Ada would give a lesson and then urge their children to perform—something that elicited smirks, guffaws, and sometimes out-and-out laughter.

President Hinckley commented:

"It took us a long time to reach the point where we could sing together without giggling. It must have been disgusting to my parents the way we giggled."

But Bryant and Ada persisted. The family had regular family prayer and often listened to faith-promoting incidents from Bryant's seemingly endless

reservoir of stories. Though some family home evenings were less tolerable than others, the net effect was positive. Those simple gatherings created strong bonds between parents and children, brothers and sisters—a critical element in the unification of their . . . family. (Dew, p. 34.)

In my view the family home evening program is a wonderful gift that Church leaders have given the parents of the Church. It is encouragement to do a more effective job of teaching our children and to formalize a time to do it. Recommending a day for this to generally occur makes it easier for parents to defend the time for the family if they will just take advantage of it. It may be a small and simple thing to take the time weekly to teach our children, but the rewards are great.

I will share our own experience with home evening:

In the early '80s the Church reemphasized each family saving Monday nights for family home evening. In our family we had talked over gospel principles at our meals and usually did something on Sunday together which could count as family home evening, but when the leaders of the Church again asked us to consistently hold family home evening, we determined to follow the program of the Church and reserve Monday nights. I had a problem. I am an ophthalmologist (eye surgeon). Our Utah Ophthalmology Society had their monthly dinner meeting on a Monday night in Salt Lake. This was an important professional meeting for me.

Several of us asked the officers of the society to move the meeting from Monday evening, but they refused. We knew that the Church could not preempt this professional meeting, so those of us who were determined to follow the counsel of the prophet simply stopped coming to the meeting. We did not make it a Church issue. We just told them that we had a conflict that made it impossible to attend. Within a short time the meeting was changed to Wednesday and the attendance increased.

As parents we moved aside any conflicts in our own schedules. We also told our children of events scheduled Monday evening which we had refused to attend, so they knew we were placing family home evening as our top priority. As our children entered the teen years when so many scheduling conflicts arise, it was rare for any of them to request absence from home evening. Recently I asked our

second daughter, who had been a very active and involved teen in high school, why it had been so rare for any of them to request missing home evening. Her reply, “You and mom always put aside other things on Monday nights and we knew we could not ask to be absent.” That approach seemed a small and simple thing at the time, but today we see the rewards as each of our married children is holding family home evening in their own families. It is a measure of reassurance to us relative to the teaching of our grandchildren.

The small and simple things which make a successful family, of course, begin with the relationship of the parents.

It seemed a small and simple thing to fall in love and marry my wife on return from my mission, but after 47 years of marriage and many small and a few large decisions, we find ourselves parents of nine children and grandparents to 36 grandchildren. All that is dear to us came step by step in seemingly small and simple ways as we moved forward with our lives.

Some, confronted by the seriousness of decisions may sit paralyzed waiting for the Lord to tell them what to do. I had a very enlightening experience relating to this principle while serving as a young and very new bishop of a student ward on this campus in the early '70s.

A young woman came to me for counsel. A fellow had proposed marriage to her. She really liked this young man but was strongly committed to not taking a step as important as marriage without receiving spiritual direction that it was right. She had been praying about whether to marry him and had received no answer. I assured her the Lord would surely answer her prayers and to keep on praying. I saw her each week for several weeks as we both became more and more frustrated that she was receiving no recognizable answer to her diligent prayers.

Finally she came again for counsel and was quite distraught. The young man was really pressing her for an answer. He loved her, but felt that she was stalling because she probably did not love him. He was approaching the time he might terminate the relationship. She felt she could not marry him without an answer from the Lord. I was very troubled by this. I knew the Lord answers prayers. I knew that this young woman and young man were worthy. I knew that this was a very important decision. Why was she not receiving an answer?

Understanding came to me in a moment of clear enlightenment. I told her that she was expecting the Lord to completely make the decisions for her and He would not do that. Even a decision as important as marriage requires a person to exercise their own agency. We read together D&C 9:7-9 where Oliver Cowdery is told why he was not able to translate the Book of Mormon.

“Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings . . .”

Like Oliver Cowdery, she had taken no thought except to keep asking the Lord. I told her that she must exercise her own agency. She must study it out in her own mind, make a tentative decision, and then ask the Lord for a confirmation of her own decision.

To facilitate her decision making, I asked her to make two lists. On one list she was to place all the positives about marrying him and the things that she liked about him. On the second list she was to outline all her doubts, anything that was a negative as she thought of marrying him. After a few days she was to evaluate the list, make a tentative decision on her own, and then go to the Lord in prayer to ask for a confirmation of her own decision.

The following Sunday she came to ask for a temple recommend to be married. I asked her if she were now sure. She felt certain that it was right to marry him. She had made the lists and had looked at them every day. Each day she was crossing things off the list of negatives and adding to the list of positives. Her words were something like, “I just began to feel good about getting married and I knew that my prayers were being answered.”

It was clear that until this young woman was moving forward on her own to use her own agency, the Lord would not enter in and tell her that she should marry. Over many years I have been able to observe the happiness of this couple and their lovely family. It was right all along for her to marry this boy, but she needed to

exercise her own agency and not expect the Lord to impose the decision on her.

In marriage the issues of agency are always present. If we fail to respect the agency of our spouse, problems will surely arise.

I have a friend who was a stake president on campus in the late '70s. I served as his counselor. In a teaching situation he shared a difficult event in his own marriage. As a recently returned missionary newly married, he wanted to be sure that he and his wife did everything right. He virtually commanded her that they would go to church. His wife is cute and saucy and independent. She refused to go to church. That happened for several weeks with him redoubling his efforts to force her to go and she becoming more stubborn in her refusal to be commanded. Finally in great concern he went to his bishop. He was given the advice to stop commanding her to come and simply say he was going to church and invite her to join him. It was but a short time that a wiser husband regularly had the company of a much happier wife at church. They also had a better idea of the proper way to relate to each other.

A sometimes destructive behavior for a wife is to be constantly reminding her husband of everything that he must do to be righteous. It can be carried to the point that all of the joy and initiative for him are removed. Of course, reasonable reminders and loving encouragement are something every man needs. Problems arise when a good thing is carried to an extreme.

I lived most summers of my youth on my grandfather's farm south of Payson, Utah. Grandfather Harris told me on several occasions a child's fable that has application in how we relate to others and respect their agency.

The sun and the wind were observing a man walking below them on a cool fall day. The wind, being very proud of his power, bet the sun that he could get the man's coat off of him more effectively than the sun could. The sun agreed to the contest.

The wind had his turn first and began to blow. The man buttoned his coat. The wind redoubled his efforts and blew so hard that he nearly tore the coat from the man's back. The man managed to hang on to his coat by using both hands to clutch it around him tightly.

Finally the sun had his turn. As the wind ceased, the sun shone brightly on the man. As the warm rays were absorbed by the coat, he unbuttoned it. As more of the sun's warmth penetrated the coat, he removed it.

Grandfather pointed out to me that we sometimes try to influence people by acting like the wind and trying to blow down their resistance and force them into the action we wish them to take, rather than having them feel our warmth and taking action on their own. Some try to influence their spouse or children by acting like the wind instead of having their family members feel their warmth and love.

The interactions of spouses seem small and perhaps simple, but their pattern produces effects which are great either in their positive or negative way.

A number of years ago I had a teacher at church whom I idealized. His knowledge was very great. He had a tremendous way of teaching the gospel. The subject matter was clearly organized in his mind. I thought he represented everything good in the church. As I associated with him more, however, I noticed that he had a grave problem. He could allow his wife no space, no opinion, no ability to talk or be involved. He squelched her every time she made any comment. He always had to be the center of attention and he always had to be right. As an isolated event it may have seemed small and harmless, but as a pattern it was very destructive. The forceful characteristics which seemed so wonderful in the setting of his teaching destroyed their marriage. He did not give to her the small and simple actions of respect and nurturing which would have solidified their marriage.

One of the most important gifts we can give our children is the simple knowledge and security that their parents love each other.

An experience with my oldest daughter when she was about eight helped me to properly place relationships within our immediate family. This daughter observed me give my wife a very tender kiss as I came home from work. She grabbed me around the legs and said, "Daddy, you love mommy more than you do us kids, don't you?" I momentarily did not know what to say, but I have always been grateful that she asked the question so directly so that I could ponder briefly and give her the correct answer. "Yes, Kathleen, I do. You children will grow up, marry, and leave our home, but your mother and I will be together forever and our

relationship is different.” I further reassured her how much her parents loved her.

As children grow and learn to responsibly use their agency, parents must give them greater latitude in making their own decisions. Even as parents respect the agency of their children, they need to be vigilant and deal with problems which sometimes develop. Years ago I had an acquaintance who was told that his children had done something quite seriously wrong. His response, “My children do not do things like that.” He would not even consider the possibility that his children could do anything wrong, so no corrective action was taken.

In contrast, another friend recently shared a situation in his family. They moved to Utah with three teenage daughters. In many ways they represent the ideal active LDS family. Their children were developing friendships in school and adjusting to their move. One day they received a shocking telephone call from a family member. Did they know that their teenage daughter had a Web page on myspace.com? This is a Web site which has caused significant alarm to concerned parents both in Utah and nationally. Apparently, young people post their pictures, personal information, telephone numbers, addresses, etc., on this site and then begin conversations online with others who are usually strangers. Sometimes designing adults visit this site to make contact with unsuspecting young people.

These parents were shocked. They went to the Web page and were troubled by the personal information their daughter had placed on the site. They noted that young people are apparently more willing to share things on the Web than they would in speaking personally to someone. They were very upset and unhappy with this development in their previously obedient daughter who had been introduced to the site through friends at school. Something had to be done

They first prayed as parents for wisdom. Their actions were not done in anger or in haste. They told the daughter and her older sister (who was not involved) that they needed to talk with them about computer use, but gave them a few minutes before that meeting to ponder what the parents might have in mind. The older sister was asked to be present as a support to the offender so that she did not feel isolated and alone as her parents were discussing the problem with her. I cannot duplicate the meeting because I was not there, but the daughter received curtailment of her computer privileges as well as careful parental correction in a way that preserved her dignity.

As I pondered this episode I also realized that the parents had in these small and simple ways been able to correct their daughter without destroying their relationship or propelling her in a direction they did not want. They also preserved her own self-concept as a good person who had made an error. She was not accused of being bad a person. The parents expressed love and confidence in her ability to make the changes she needed to. She closed her Web site, changed friends, and is moving in the direction which will bring both her and her family happiness. It was a series of small, simple, and loving steps which brought about the desired changes.

As we attend such functions as this, we are seeking for helps in wrestling with the problems our children and grandchildren face today. We will learn many excellent and helpful things from those who have developed expertise by formal training or by their own personal experience. The practical application to our own families must come through counseling together as parents, pondering, and praying. No two families are identical, but there is much knowledge which is useful. In the end we are working to touch hearts to bring about a desire to do that which is right. Force is of limited value and reserved for unusual situations in relatively small children. Agency is a fundamental ground rule of this life.

I will conclude by quoting from the Lord's directions concerning influencing others:

Section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile— Reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reprov'd, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy (41-43).

May the Lord bless us in the application of these eternal principles to our own families I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.