

Going the Extra Smile

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The theme of this conference is found in Mosiah 4:27 where we read, “And see that all these things are done in wisdom and order.” It’s obvious that King Benjamin didn’t grow up in my parents’ home or he would have said, “And see that all these things are done in wisdom and order and with a smile on your face!” As we learn the importance of keeping a positive attitude, we realize that staying positive is indeed an important part of being wise. CNN reported the results of a study that showed that those who demonstrate a positive attitude actually live longer than those who don’t. According to this study, it was seven and a half years longer. It seems to me that keeping a smile on our faces is a wise thing to do—especially when we are dealing with family!

Most people have received more than enough lessons on keeping a positive attitude. We have all been told to see the glass as half full instead of half empty, turn life’s lemons into lemonade, and count blessings rather than problems. We have all heard it takes more muscles to frown than smile and have read the classic poem about the two men who looked out of prison bars—one seeing mud and the other seeing stars. Such sayings serve as good reminders, but if not kept in perspective, they can actually be discouraging. After all, some days we relate more to the man who saw mud. The picture of a prisoner blissfully stargazing from his cell definitely represents a positive ideal, but on some days it seems unrealistic and unattainable.

We’re human. Everyone experiences a range of moods including negative emotions. That’s not necessarily bad. It’s okay to occasionally feel down and discouraged. Of course we must learn to take responsibility for our feelings and do our best to stay positive, but now and then who cares whether the dumb glass is half anything and we don’t even want lemonade! The fact that we all feel that way sometimes is exactly why we laugh when we see bumper stickers that say “Smile first

thing in the morning (and get it over with)” or “Want to wake up with a smile? Sleep with a hanger in your mouth!”

My son, Russell, loved Dr. Seuss books when he was younger. One of his favorites is the last complete book Dr. Seuss wrote called *My Many Colored Days* (New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 1996). It tells about the variety of moods or colors that filled Dr. Seuss’ life. He wrote about how sometimes he felt red, blue, green, etc. Dr. Seuss never even got to illustrate his book before he passed away, but it was still published—an insightful parting message from a beloved author.

Keeping a positive attitude doesn’t mean we have to suppress the dark colors and walk around 24 hours a day with fake smiles plastered across our faces. It simply means we must learn to bring the light and dark colors of our lives together in balance, harmony, and perspective. It means we learn how to put our moods and concerns on the back burner and the needs of others up front. Regardless of the current color of our day, we can make a sincere effort to smile more, smile first, and smile despite problems.

Smile More

My late father, Ray T. Wilcox, served his mission in Tahiti, and so our family has heard many stories of the faithful and wonderful Saints living in the islands of French Polynesia. When we had the opportunity of visiting Tahiti, we were impressed with how multilingual the people were. Most spoke French and Tahitian fluently. Many spoke English as well. However, the thing that impressed us most of all was how fluent the Tahitians were in the most important language of all. Grandma Wilcox calls it the language of smile.

When my wife and I attended the temple, everyone smiled and extended their hands (and not just the temple workers). As they completed the endowment session and entered the celestial room, we truly felt as though they were in heaven—encircled in love and acceptance, literally surrounded by smiles.

As we consciously attempt to smile more, we can help others feel the way my wife and I felt in the Tahiti Temple. We don’t have to be in a celestial room to act in a celestial way. We don’t have to be on a South Pacific island to give others a taste of paradise. We all know how to speak the language of smile. We just need to do it a little more.

When people go to Disneyland they expect to see a happy Mickey Mouse. It may be the last hour of his shift, but Mickey Mouse can’t let up. He may have met hundreds of children throughout the day, but this could very well be the next child’s first and perhaps only encounter.

In the same way, people expect missionaries to be happy and outgoing. Missionaries may have knocked on hundreds of doors, but it may be the first meeting for the one opening the next door. Missionaries may be tired and want to relax on the bus ride home, but like Mickey Mouse, they have an image to keep up. They need to be the ones who make eye contact, greet others with a smile, pay a sincere compliment, and try to begin a friendly conversation. Sunday may be the end of a long and exhausting week, but members don’t come to church expecting to buoy up a missionary.

They expect “Mickey” to be there welcoming them and giving them encouragement to keep going.

As Russell teaches at the MTC, he has noticed that many new missionaries become so preoccupied with practicing Spanish, lessons, and scriptures that they sometimes forget to practice smiling. They speak, teach, recite scriptures, and testify without ever smiling. He sometimes shares with them the scripture 2 Nephi 9:39, which reads, “to be spiritually-minded is life eternal.” Then he points out that the first letters of the words starting with *spiritually* spell S-M-I-L-E. Indeed, to be spiritually minded doesn’t mean we have to be serious and solemn all the time. We can enjoy the moment and smile. Russell tells the missionaries that unless they smile, people are not even going to be interested in the language, lessons, and scriptures they are working so hard to learn.

Elder Joe J. Christensen, former member of the presidency of the Seventy and also a former president of the MTC in Provo, said, “Smile. Force it if you have to, but smile. . . . How many times in the scriptures does the Lord command us to ‘be of good cheer’ or ‘lift up your heart and rejoice’ and ‘be exceedingly glad’? We should remember that happiness is a *commandment* and not merely a *suggestion*” (“A Reason to Smile,” *Liahona*, September 1998, 28).

Smile First

It is not uncommon to hear stories of people who have been offended at church because “No one even smiled or said hello.” The question we always have is how many people did they greet? How many people did they smile at? Still, they don’t see that as their responsibility.

Too often we wait for someone else to smile before we smile back. We wait for another person to nod or wave before we do the same. Are we puppets who can only respond when someone pulls the right string? Or are we willing to initiate positive interactions?

A young woman once said her goal was “to be a thermostat and not a thermometer.” When asked what she meant, she explained, “A thermometer measures the temperature. A thermostat sets it. Anyone can measure the temperature, but I want to be the one who sets the temperature.” And nothing sets the right temperature like smiling first.

As I walk across campus at Brigham Young University, I try to smile and say hello to those I pass whether or not I know them. Often when I’m walking toward people on a sidewalk and they don’t know me, they try to avoid contact by averting their eyes and looking down. I don’t let them get away with that. I usually lean right over, catch their eyes, and say a loud, “Hi!” I almost always get a laugh as they realize how silly it is that sidewalks often get more attention than the people who walk on them. Sometimes I say hi and no one even notices since they are listening to their iPods or talking on cell phones.

Artist James C. Christensen once asked President Spencer W. Kimball, “President, if you were going to hang a painting of the Savior in your office, what would you want that picture to be like?”

President Kimball took off his glasses and got very close to Brother Christensen’s face. Then he said, “Can you see anything in my eyes that tells you that I love people? In that picture, I would like to see in the Savior’s eyes that he truly loves people. It is not affected; it is not his job. He truly loves all people.” (See Edward L. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball*. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005], 421–22).

A smile doesn’t just communicate happiness, it communicates love. It’s easy to smile first when our hearts are filled with love. Then, like President Kimball explained, it is not our “job.” It is our nature. Perhaps putting a smile on our faces is a huge step toward having Christ’s image in our countenances.

Smile Despite

Our family was impressed with the positive attitude shown by our former neighbor, Ron Zaret, who said, “The bad news is that I have to have another back surgery, but the good news is they are waiting until after my kidney surgery.” How’s that for smiling despite problems? Later he told us, “The bad news is they ended up removing one of my kidneys because it was full of cancer. The good news is now I only have one kidney left to produce kidney stones.”

Following Brother Zaret’s line of thinking, I guess the bad news is that life is full of disappointments, trials, sadness, injustice, and pain. The good news is that we have the power to smile despite it all. Happiness is a choice and not just a mood. Jesus said, “Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh” (Luke 6:21).

One missionary, Elder Johnston, said, “On my mission I have learned to find my smile and be happy. It hasn’t been easy because my happiness was always linked to success and achievements and on the mission sometimes those don’t come the way you would like. I have had to learn to be happy even when others make poor choices.”

One mother struggled when her teenage daughter became defiant, belligerent, and began breaking the Word of Wisdom and law of chastity. The girl fought against authority and eventually dropped out of high school. The mother said, “This was as difficult a challenge as any I had previously faced. I became despondent and inconsolable.” She fasted, prayed, and sought advice from her bishop. She asked for priesthood blessings and spent hours reading scriptures and books on dealing with difficult teenagers. Still, she was miserable. She said, “I wondered, *Where is the joy in family life? When will these problems cease?* Finding no resolution, I lost all confidence in my ability to parent. I felt desperate, angry, and helpless.”

The next few years were difficult for this mother, but slowly she began to realize that while there were things about her daughter’s life over which she had little control,

there were things about her own life that she could change. She said, “I decided I needed to go back to the basics of the gospel and build a stronger, more solid spirituality. I wondered when was the last time, for instance, I had offered prayers of gratitude. Had I completely forgotten my many blessings? Had I actively looked for the good qualities of my struggling daughter? Did I appreciate the obedient members of my family, or had I forgotten their faithfulness?”

This mother tried to fill herself with good and positive thoughts. She read uplifting books and became diligent with a personal exercise program. She read the scriptures in the morning and pondered them in the car rather than listening to the radio. Did the daughter see the error of her ways? Did she turn around, repent, and gain a testimony? Actually, she did make some progress, but has not yet returned to full activity in the Church, but that’s not the point. Did the mother learn to smile despite her daughter’s poor choices? Yes. (See “Loving My Wayward Child,” *Ensign*, September 2001, 26–28).

Another example of smiling despite problems happened when our family lived in New Zealand where I was directing a study abroad program for Brigham Young University. It was on the world-changing day of September 11, 2001 (actually, because of the time difference, it was September 12 for us), that terrorists committed their unfathomable crimes. A friend in our ward in Auckland called around 3:00 a.m. and told us the United States was under attack. Debi took the call, and when she came back to bed and reported, I was sure it was a joke. Still, who would joke about something like that? Debi and I got up, went downstairs, switched on the television quietly so as to not awaken the children, and then watched along with the rest of the world as the unthinkable horror unfolded. We were stunned and shocked. We prayed and didn’t try to hold back tears. Russell woke up for early morning seminary and was surprised to see his parents watching TV. We explained what was happening, but it didn’t really hit Russell how serious it was until he was at seminary and listened to the comments and sympathetic condolences of his teacher and fellow students. I had to call each of the study abroad students with the news and instructions he had received from BYU after the attacks.

The students were told to go about their regular schedules which meant reporting to their assigned classrooms where they were student teaching. Then one at a time the calls started coming from the schools. They couldn’t do it, not that day. Russell and I drove around Auckland picking up the students from the schools and bringing them to our home where we all sat watching the news and grieving together. The group was half a world away from all that was happening, but we felt the devastation as if we were right there.

How does one smile at a time like that? The anger, hurt, fear, and vulnerability we all felt were emotions that were real and intense. In that moment smiles were hard to come by, but over the weeks and months that followed they came—not smiles because of what occurred, but smiles because of what we know that helped us keep things in perspective. We know about the plan of salvation and the gift of agency. We know God is all powerful. He could have stopped it all at any moment, but faith is not just knowing God can. Faith is also understanding why sometimes he doesn’t. Along with being all powerful, God is also all knowing (Moroni 7:22). We can trust him because he sees the end from the beginning and has a plan for our lives.

How did we make it through that experience? It helped to hear a prophet speak about the reality of the spirit world, resurrection, and the Atonement. It helped to know that, while it never justifies it, good can come from evil and peace can be felt amid conflict.

In times of discouragement, it is not cute sayings about the glass being half full or looking for silver linings that give us strength to carry on. It is knowing the gospel and keeping covenants that provide the will and power to survive. Elder Robert E. Wells of the First Quorum of Seventy has written, “In spite of all the problems in the world today, peace can come to the hearts of each of us as we follow the Savior” (“Peace on Earth,” *Ensign*, September 2001, 31).

As we face tragedy, whether it is witnessed by billions around the world or is so personal and private that no one is aware of it but God, we can cling to the Savior’s words: “Fear not, little children, for you are mine, and I have overcome the world” (D&C 50:41). It is in that knowledge that we find the strength to go the extra smile—smile more, smile first, and smile despite anything that comes.