

Off to the Rescue: The Ultimate Engagement

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In July I spent four days with 75 men whose average age was about 84. They were gathered in commemoration of a historic bombing raid of World War II, and in remembrance of their comrades who did not return from that raid or who have passed away since. Over 1,700 of them took off on August 1, 1943, to bomb the Rumanian oil fields at Ploesti, the major source of oil for Hitler's war effort. The unusual nature of the mission included the decision to bomb at low-level—making runs on the target from 50 to 200 feet above the ground. (Some returning bombers were photographed after landing at their home bases with cornstalks in their engine cowlings.) Over 300 were killed that day, with hundreds more wounded or in POW camps. Those who attended the reunion in Salt Lake City in 2003 knew the men of their own squadrons and groups, but hardly those from the other groups. I was intrigued regarding what drew members of five different bombing groups, who flew from five different bases in Libya several miles apart from each other, to gather 60 years later. I haven't figured it all out, but I have concluded that fundamental to their bond with one another, nurtured intermittently over the years, was that they had once, in the same time and place, engaged in a cooperative effort to be off to the rescue.

They were seeking to rescue a continent whose populations had become chained by tyranny. They were engaged in the attempt to liberate strangers who were from other cultures and who spoke languages other than their own. Theirs was not a face-to-face rescue and was an attempt to free a population from physical bondage, rather than social-emotional-spiritual bondage. Yet their reunion was sprinkled with acknowledgments of the hand of the Lord in their lives and with a humility that they had been allowed to remain on earth while large numbers of their brothers had perished.

I learned much from these men and their families, which relates to our efforts in our callings and our professions to rescue others from injustice, abuse, disease, and despair. I believe we have an obligation to attend to the spirit and attitude with which we go about our rescue efforts. I find my own efforts are grounded not so much in my knowledge or skills—however broad or competent, limited or pitiful, my knowledge and skills may be. The starting point of our efforts is in our willingness to do so and begins in our relationship with those to be rescued. The quality of our relationship with those we seek to rescue is, to a great extent, in our own hands. Perhaps I can elaborate on that idea and suggest some starting points and principles for all of us who are engaged in the worthy work of helping others make their tomorrows even greater blessings than their yesterdays.

Incidentally, in the announcement to the men charged to bomb Ploesti, the offer was made that if any did not feel he could commit to such a daring, even death-defying mission, he need only tell his commanding officer that he would not go, and no questions would be asked. Of course, no aircrew declined to fulfill the mission. Undoubtedly, social and cultural factors played a role in such unanimity of purpose, but the crews, in their commitments and beliefs, went voluntarily into the flames to accomplish a purpose. Similarly, and especially in our callings, do we set about the task of rescuing voluntarily, not knowing what the ultimate outcome of our offering will be?

I am claiming, then, that the relationship we have with those to be rescued is fundamental. To examine that relationship, we could begin with two questions: 1) Who are we? 2) Who are those to be rescued? Perhaps remembering that the humanity we share is fundamental is a worthwhile place to begin. If I can see you as my neighbor, my brother, or my sister, we begin the task of rescuing as equals with those to be rescued. Thus, I sense your hopes and dreams matter to you in the same ways mine matter to me. Choices that would be destructive of my best interests are likely destructive of yours as well—especially when the issue is a moral one.

As beings of great worth, we stand on equal ground, and our commitment to their well-being is understandable when we realize their lives are as valuable as our own. The humility of those who returned from Ploesti was, in part, due to the recognition that those who were lost were at least as valuable as those whose mortal lives had been preserved.

As a faculty member at the University of New Mexico, I paused in a hallway to eavesdrop on a special education class. What caught my attention was this line from the instructor: “Today, we will talk about MRs.” I hadn’t figured out what that acronym referred to until I listened for a few moments. Oh, he meant “mentally retarded.” I was already unsettled by the tone and content of the lecture because my youngest brother is a Down syndrome boy. Although I obviously knew he was “retarded,” we viewed him—then and now—as a person with identity and humanity. He was not an MR, to us, but was—well, he was Phillip. The lecture continued with descriptions of those who fell into the MR category and with descriptions of the varieties of causes of mental retardation. However, the spirit of the discussion was to label and categorize the various conditions, and no condition described had the benefit of an example of a human face, of a person of worth. I could not find a “place” in all the categories to put my brother; there was no room for a Phillip. It struck me that we can breeze through categories impersonally and uncommittedly, as we might pass by so many anonymous rocks on some hiking trail, or through so many blades of grass as we mow a lawn. When I am tempted to see myself as separate from,

or more different than like the people I might be called to rescue, I remember my brother (who died in an accident at 23) and the limited value of categories and labels when they become substitutes for granting someone their humanity. Most of all, I remember that those to be rescued are people who matter as much as we do, even if they happen to face challenges that are not quite like our own. So who we are and who they are is relevant to how we relate. It is in our commonalities that rescuers and the to-be-rescued have a relationship.

That relationship includes some fundamental truths essential to living lives of high quality. One truth is to see ourselves as humans honestly. Seeing ourselves honestly is to see ourselves as moral agents. Seeing ourselves as moral agents means seeing ourselves as capable of acting on the environment—of being able to do something to solve our problems and meet our challenges, rather than seeing ourselves as helpless victims of the situation, or as so fragile that the circumstances of life can overwhelm us. In those moments we may see ourselves as incapable of acting on the environment or as overwhelmed, we are not simultaneously seeing ourselves as moral agents. To be sure, we may not be able to solve some problems or dictate the outcomes of our choices. That was painfully true to the men of Ploesti who did not return that day. But they nevertheless saw the possibility that they could go, do, and survive. To assume in advance in such circumstances that all is lost is to see life and ourselves in a false way. It is giving up on the possibilities life offers instead of living with the hope of those possibilities.

An additional implication of granting each other equal worth in the rescuing enterprise is the fact that every person is connected to a family. Every story is a family story. We do not grow and develop, or become traumatized or destructive, in isolation. The quality of our connections—beginning in the family—is basic to understanding our human condition. This is because we are basically relational beings; we need relationships to become fully human. When those relationships are destructive, they breed problems instead of solutions. But at least two ways of making sense out of those relationships are possible. We can begin to see others and ourselves as mere victims of our family connections or as capable, in the present moment, of creating or re-creating relational connections of quality. Since our task as rescuers is how to be part of the solution to the challenges or problems faced by those needing to be rescued, instead of being part of those problems, we must begin with an honest view of ourselves and of what the possible solutions to our difficulties are. If we retain the notion that the problems we face are hopelessly rooted in the past, then the present moment is indeed hopeless, or at best a circumstance that can merely be coped with rather than resolved. This is an admission that sometimes we (and they) can contribute to the problems we are mutually trying to solve, merely by our way of being in the world. That view of what we are as humans is a symptom of solutions to our problems only when it includes seeing ourselves as capable of seeking solutions. Then we are doing our part to meet challenges or solve problems.

An unforgettable couple I renewed my connection with at the Ploesti reunion was Loy and Arlene Neeper. I had met them at a similar reunion in 1997. That was before he was confronted with Lou Gehrig's disease. In 1997, Loy was physically robust and cheerful. In July 2003 Loy was wheelchair bound and cheerful. His muscles had begun their deterioration. He could no longer speak. He communicated using a keyboard with a screen and speaker that allowed him to type in a sentence or so at a time. I knew he had been an amateur softball player. In fact, my father was a regular in pick-up games at the bases in England and Libya. I asked if

he had ever made it to any major league games. He typed out a sentence and pressed a button. The speaker on his machine announced, “No, but I got a major league ballplayer’s disease.” I looked at him, and the minimal facial muscles that functioned were now in a smile. Loy was not giving up on the possibilities and was willing to do what was possible. His wife told me he just felt he had to come to the reunion. Obviously, he couldn’t have come alone. His wife and daughter rescued him from his physical limitations to do that which was possible: bring him to the reunion. His family connections were of a quality equal to his individual spirit.

Our attempts to rescue others from social-emotional-spiritual limitations will be more effective if we have their spirit of hope and their confidence in their own capability to bear their burdens with us. If they seem instead to have given up, or to spend excessive energy proving they have been mistreated or neglected by those who should have cared, our success will be minimal and temporary. We may not know how we would respond if we were in their shoes, but we do know the consequences of losing hope. Our first gift as rescuers is to offer hope to those who have abandoned it. In that sense, we remember that we are of equal worth and are equally nourished when we live in hope.

Most of the obstacles to the rescue process are spawned by how we see ourselves. Three debilitating, destructive views of our identity include seeing ourselves as being fragile, being victims, or being helpless. Those renditions of our experience seem real and justified to us, but are self-deceptions. Even in those moments when we have been treated unjustly or when solutions to our afflictions are way beyond our abilities, our willingness to do what can be done is basic to our true identity.

I once counseled a woman who kept insisting she was not fit to be a mother—didn’t have the skills, the knowledge, or the temperament to raise children. I was early in my career, and our counseling sessions deteriorated into her despair about not having the wherewithal to engage in quality mothering, and my attempts to encourage, reassure and, in other ways, convince her and “pump her up” regarding her own abilities. Then one day, facing a judge’s deadline regarding whether the children should be taken from the home, I saw I was helping this woman go around in circles and avoid the steps or changes essential to her keeping her children.

I began our next session with a proposal I hoped she would take seriously. I began, “Gretchen (a pseudonym, of course), do you know how you have been insisting that you aren’t fit to be a mother—you don’t feel you have the knowledge or the skills to manage this whole motherhood thing?” She nodded. I continued, “Well, I have been thinking about your sense of this quite seriously. I mean we have been going around for three months now, and I admit I haven’t convinced you that you have what it takes to do this. I apologize for not taking you seriously, but I do have a solution now. You are probably wondering why either one of us didn’t think of this before.”

I pulled out documents that could be filled out, terminating her parental rights and making adoption plans for her children. I explained the documents to her and indicated we could begin the process right now, and we could use the counseling time most effectively by getting the forms filled out. I looked across the desk. She was emanating all the physical signs of a

locomotive building up steam. She uttered vehemently through clenched teeth, “Nobody is going to take **my** children away!”

I reassured her, “No, really, don’t you see how this would be best for you, best for the children, and best for us? I mean we wouldn’t have to meet anymore. You would no longer have to absorb counseling costs into your limited budget, and you and your husband would have time to devote to other things.” She was unpersuaded. I continued to respond to her objections in the same vein, and she continued to heatedly object. I reminded her how intensely she had been insisting that rearing children was simply beyond her. She began to argue against all her own arguments of the past ninety days and even began suggesting alternatives to the notion of making adoption plans for her children.

I finally stopped my insistence and asked, “Gretchen, you are now saying the same things to me that I have been saying to you. How can that be? Why am I supposed to believe that you are suddenly Mrs. Competent, when even last week you were convinced you were a lost cause as a mother?”

She fell silent. I said, “In truth, I cannot demand you send your children to another home, but a judge could do that. If you are as incompetent as you have been claiming these last few months, you wouldn’t stand much of a chance in a family services hearing. So you’ve got to convince me what new starting points in being a mother you are willing to try.”

Obviously, I have simplified and condensed this story, but the problem and the solution indicate that sometimes our well-intentioned efforts to reassure someone end up being a collaboration with them in the idea that they are helpless. While people may be more or less skilled in various parenting tasks, I have rarely found either mothers or fathers to be completely bankrupt in abilities. To refuse to allow people to disqualify themselves totally as parent material is to lay a foundation for a solution to problems they think are insurmountable. We can nourish the idea that the first step in having what it takes to be a parent is to give up the idea that they do not have what it takes to be a parent. Then they can begin taking steps—even baby steps if necessary—to get better or more skilled tomorrow than they were yesterday. At this point we do not know if they will continue to progress, but we will find out soon enough. At the least, by creating a legitimate starting point (being willing to see their own capabilities more honestly and compassionately), we can all experiment with new possibilities. Without such a change of heart regarding themselves, all new experiments will be undermined in advance. As long as I accepted this mother’s assumption of being pathetic as a parent, she never considered seriously the idea of her competence.

In other words, in helping rescue people from circumstances or from themselves, the most fundamental way we are part of the problem instead of the solution is when we see the circumstances as more fundamental than the people in those circumstances. That is, I must first make sure both the individual and I see ourselves and the problem to be solved honestly. If I allow a false view of who we are to continue, we will never see truly the resources available to solve the problem. The most generic illustration of this issue is when we do not see the person to be rescued as capable of participating in the rescue.

An additional example of what I am talking about is when humans see themselves as fragile. Specifically, this means that they walk in this life with the assumption or belief that life can become more than they can bear. They believe that some broken hearts never mend. They feel that certain brands of trauma will scar them for life. It is more difficult to counter such a view without the gospel and the Atonement than with it. With people of belief, we can remind them that the Savior descended below all things and that He has beckoned us to come unto Him and He will give us rest (Matthew 11:28). If we take His yoke upon us, we discover His burden is light. If we are rescuing Latter-day Saints, we can add the truth that the Lord will not allow us to face more than we can bear (see Alma 13:28).

To be blessed by such a promise, the Doctrine and Covenants offers this basic truth to those in need of rescue: “. . . the Lord require[s] the hearts of the children of men.” (D&C 64:22) Moreover, counsel is given in the same section that could apply to rescuers and those to be rescued:

1. Ye are on the Lord’s errand (verse 29).
2. Be not weary in well-doing (verse 33).
3. Ye are laying the foundation of a great work (verse 33).
4. Out of small things proceedeth that which is great (verse 33).
5. The Lord requireth the heart and a willing mind (verse 34).
6. The willing and the obedient shall eat the good of the land of Zion in these last days (verse 34).

Imagine what our rescue work would be like if we brought ourselves to the task living by the counsel in these verses. Imagine how successful we would likely be if those to be rescued brought their hearts, minds, and obedience to the task. Imagine if both rescuer and rescued started the engagement with the confidence that the Lord would not “tempt” or try them above that which they would be able to bear. With such a starting point, our efforts are likely to be successful, even when the outcomes are not as we all might have requested. When we see ourselves as agents rather than victims, as resilient rather than fragile, as able to bear rather than in despair, why should we not have every reason to go on in so great a cause? Ultimately, the outcomes of our crises and trials do not depend on the circumstances through which we are passing, but upon who we are when we pass through those circumstances. Those needing to be rescued do their part when they respond to rescue efforts in humility, confidence, faith, and gratitude. Those doing the rescuing are self-forgetful, long-suffering, patient, and full of love.

My father was on that Ploesti raid in Rumania on August 1, 1943. That is why I had a thirst to connect with those in his squadron who shared that rescue effort. But two months later, on October 1, 1943, my father was shot down over Wiener Neustadt, Austria. I know the circumstances. I know he was flying the plane after having sounded the alarm that the bomb bay was on fire. I know everyone got out of the plane except him. I did not know one feature of the event until August 1, 2003, when James McAtee, the pilot of another plane on that October raid where my father was lost, said to me, “Terry, I knew your father had a son, and I’ve always wanted to meet you. Before the war was over, a member of your dad’s crew wrote to me from his POW camp and said, ‘If you ever see Stan Olson’s son, tell him his dad was a hero. One of the crew got hung up trying to get out of the plane and, in that delay, bailed out only two seconds before the plane exploded. The plane was flying straight and level until it exploded.’”

Now, I must testify that in addition to the comfort and affirmation that my father was an ultimate rescuer, I must say that I believe the scriptures. I believe that whatever blessings might have been had my father returned from the war, they have been swallowed up in the blessings that have been. The Lord has attended to my earthly mission, and I cannot utter one complaint. I have been blessed by rescuers from time to time, and I have, from time to time, seen myself as a victim. When I have abandoned such false notions as victimhood, I have always faced a clear pathway as to what I can do, what I ought to do, and what is possible to do, even though I have rarely been shown the outcome of those doings.

Those we seek to rescue, those for whom we care enough to give our very best (Hallmark Enterprises), may not be given any vision or guarantee of what is next in their lives. But if they live with the honest acknowledgment that they are moral agents, not victims, not fragile, and that in their circumstances they are not helpless and life is not hopeless, the Lord will work with you and with them to chart righteous possibilities in your rescue attempts. We will either receive those possibilities, or we will reject them. We will either see our life's mission anew, or we will remain in despair. We will either be reminded in the outcome that, after all, we are only in the service of our fellow beings, or we will fail to grasp the greatness of the small things in which we are engaged and not be blessed by the hand of the Lord in our lives. In all sincerity, I affirm that all things work together for the good of those who love the Lord, and that blessings are offered equally to the rescuers and the rescued.