Family Crucibles
Finding Peace in Trying Times

By E. Jeffrey Hill
Brigham Young University is where I met, courted, and married my wife of 28 years, Juanita Ray Hill. One particular memory of that era stands out in my mind. I wanted to present my future wife with an engagement ring in an out-of-the-ordinary location. So while riding the Wilkinson Center elevator I surprised her with her glittering gift, the symbol of my affection. In delight, she tossed her arms around me and gave me a very affectionate hug and kiss, right up to and even a little after the elevator doors opened wide at the Sky Room Restaurant. What an exciting moment!

Ever since then Juanita and I have had the tradition of embracing and kissing in elevators. When others ride with us, I just give her a discrete tap on the shoulder and a peck on the cheek. But when we find ourselves alone, we recreate those romantic feelings of young love with very affectionate hugs and kisses. I like elevators! Back then I thought that when we married we would live happily ever after. I thought there were no challenges love would not conquer.

However, over the years we have found our family life is like an elevator with many ups and downs. We have also found that the building in which our elevator of family life resides is still under construction. It is growing taller now because our family joys are higher and more exhilarating than ever. Unfortunately, there also seems to be some minion excavating in the basement because our challenges, heartaches, and trials also seem to be more profound.

Through it all, however, Juanita and I continue our elevator tradition. Our kisses were joyful in the hospital elevator at Tacoma General Hospital as we brought home our first healthy baby daughter, but our embraces were somber and consoling in that very same elevator three years later after Juanita’s first miscarriage. We hugged each other tightly and sobbed when Juanita was diagnosed with Stage 3 breast cancer. Our family life has been a series of ups and downs, but our faith has given appreciation to our happiness and meaning to our suffering, helping us find peace in trying times.

Many of my students have come from great homes and are quite optimistic about family life. In fact, I fear that some students may be overly optimistic about family life, and may be setting themselves up for disillusionment, despair, and even depression.

To add a bit of perspective I ask my students at the beginning of each semester to memorize three sayings that I believe will help them as they seek for family peace in these trying times.

1. **Life is hard, but you can do hard things.** You never know what life will deal you, nor can you ever imagine how hard it’s going to be, but it is so worth it.

2. **Make the best of it.** Family life never, ever turns out the way you planned. What I tell my students is that when things don’t go as planned, don’t get frustrated, just make the best of it. Don’t dwell on what’s gone wrong, don’t focus on what you can’t do. Focus on what’s gone right and what you can do.

3. **T.T.T. = Things Take Time.** Family life is a journey of a thousand miles that is made up of single steps. We must learn to have patience.

T.T.T.
put up in a place where it’s easy to see
The cryptic admonishment: T.T.T.
When you feel how depressing slowly you climb,
It's well to remember that
Things Take Time.
— Piet Hein (1966)

These three succinct reminders—life is hard but you can do hard things, make the best of it, and T.T.T.—apply very much to understanding my topic, “Family Crucibles: Finding Peace in Trying Times.”

Not surprisingly, in the BYU School of Family Life, we use a family lens to examine relationships, activities, and structures in a way that strengthens families (Carroll, et. al., 2000). While we may not choose them, parents and children can use trials, afflictions, hardships, challenges, problems, sorrow, and grief to strengthen their families. In fact, it is possible to learn from, deal with, and give meaning to the trials of life in such a way that we can maintain hope and not despair in our families. By having a family crucible perspective, we can find peace in trying times. Let's lay a foundation first for understanding these principles. First of all, what are crucibles?
Dr. Susanne Olson has written, "[Crucibles are] furnace-like vessel[s] that [can] endure intense heat and chemical reactions. [This] result[s] in the refinement and transfiguration of raw materials. Crucibles facilitate a catalytic process that purges away impurities and creates a qualitatively different final product. In industry, crucibles are used to create high-grade steel and alloys of unusual strength that actually differ in quality from the original ingredients themselves" (Olsen, et al., 2000, p. 278). You may have seen movies showing the fiery furnace of a steel mill where you see the glowing molten iron ore bubbling in a large cauldron. This container is a crucible, and it facilitates the creation of a useful product of great strength.

For the purposes of this article, think of a family crucible as the process by which trials, afflictions, hardships, challenges, problems, sorrow, grief, and other adversity all can facilitate positive family growth, rather than negative family outcomes.

Family research shows that family crises tend to bring out the best and the worst in families. They can rip families apart or cause families to reorganize themselves in more positive ways. Consider these possibilities:
- By successfully passing through the heat and pressure of family crucibles, family members may become more humble, more sincere, more united in prayer, more dependent upon God, more faith-ful, and more sensitive to spiritual promptings.
- They may also become more charitable, more service-oriented, and more compassionate to the needs and suffering of others.
- Family relationships may be strengthened, as the whole family is more motivated to be founded upon enobling principles.
- Ultimately, family crucibles can create unbreak-able bonds between the members of the family.

Aren't these wonderful possibilities? Don't they make you want to pray for your own trials? In truth, probably not, because we have all seen that the positive doesn't always come out in trials. Unfortunately, adversity can also severely cripple and even destroy families. It is very hard, extremely hard, to ever recover from some trials, much less use them as a catalyst for family growth. It is hard, but we can do hard things! Barbara Johnson (1990) wrote a book whose title I really like, *Pain is Inevitable, but Misery Optional*. It is my opinion that though we may not have control over pain, we can often choose not to become miserable.

Almost all families go through several experi-ences that are so difficult that sufficient heat and pressure are generated to create a family crucible experience. Let me just share a few of them, and as I go through the list, note how many of these you and your family have gone through and how many you are going through right now.

**Family Crucibles Related to Family Formation:**
- inability to find a mate and marry
- broken engagement
- bad start to marriage (persistent honeymoon, disastrous wedding)
- entering a blended family

**Family Crucibles Related to Marriage:**
- disability (chronic illness, accident)
- spouse is of another religion
- husband or wife loses religious faith
- spouse undermines faith or moral development of children
- extreme marital conflict (shouting, throwing things)
- marital abuse (physical, emotional, sexual)
- addiction (alcohol, drugs, pornography)
- infidelity (an affair or emotional triangle)
- depression (one or both spouses)
- husband or wife deserts the family
- suicide
- separation, divorce
- death

**Family Crucibles Related to Procreation, Birth, and Infancy:**
- infertility
- problem pregnancy
- miscarriage, stillborn child
- very premature delivery
- multiple births (twins, triplets, quadruplets)
- S.I.D.S.
- baby with colic
- baby with disabilities (mental, physical, Down syndrome, deformities)

**Family Crucibles Related to the Nurturer Role and Parenting:**
- hyperactive child
- abuse (physical, emotional, sexual)
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- addiction (alcohol, drugs, pornography)
- adolescent in family prematurely pregnant
- child loses faith, refuses to go to church
- child attempts and/or succeeds at suicide
- prolonged or serious depression
- teenagers, wayward child
- runaway children
- adult children returning home
- adult children who never marry, never leave home

**Family Crucibles Centered in the External Environment:**
- natural disaster (earthquake, tidal wave, tornado, hurricane, flood)
- legal problems (family member arrested, sued, etc.)
- extremely demanding civic or church responsibilities
- war, terrorism, civil unrest

This is just the start. The students I teach are often unaware of how many and how common these extreme challenges are. In one illuminating assignment I use, based on an exercise developed by my colleague Randy Day (2003) for his *Introduction to Family Process* class, I ask my students to look ahead the next 50 years and develop a timeline of all the family events they hope will transpire. Then they are asked to pick three family crucibles at random and then re-chart their life script so that they see how these crucibles will change their life script dramatically. The students are sobered when I tell them that the average family goes through three or more of these extreme family crucibles. I remind them that family life is hard, but they can do hard things. I remind them that if they want to claim the blessing of peace in trying times, they will have to make the best of less than optimal circumstances.
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And I remind them that on the path to family joy, many things just take time. They must develop the virtue of patience, if they want to claim this joy.

I would ask you to consider how many of these trials you have gone through. Perhaps three? At least five? More than 10? Family life is hard, isn’t it? But guess what? We can do hard things. Certainly pain in family life is inevitable, but I want to make the point that misery is indeed optional, and, in fact, we can make choices that will also lead us to family joy.

I am by nature a very optimistic person. On the other hand, my wife Juanita is a realistic person. This difference could be a trial, could trigger constant and unbearable frustration, and could ultimately lead to the destruction of our marriage! However, we have chosen to frame this difference as a strength in our marriage, and I choose to appreciate that Juanita has the characteristics to temper me. I keep her from sinking into pessimism, and she keeps me from floating away into the clouds.

Juanita likes lists and specific suggestions, so when I asked her for suggestions for this article, I was not surprised when she said I should create a practical list of principles and practices to help families deal with trials. I have done so. To create this list I asked my colleagues from the School of Family Life to offer suggestions, I talked with family members and friends, I asked students in my classes, and I studied both academic research and religious writings. With that preparation, I dedicate the following 10 principles to my eternally realistic companion, Juanita.

1. Be prepared. In good times practice principles of family preparedness, which include spiritual, physical, social, and emotional development; education and literacy; employment; financial and resource management; food storage; and emergency preparedness. Then, when the trials come, you will have more family resources to deal with them.

2. Involve family members (when appropriate). Communicate clear and accurate information with an understanding of the ability of each family member to cope. Keep everyone informed as developments arise and conditions change which involve the present crisis. Talk together openly and frequently. Communicate one-on-one. Go for walks and just listen. Ask for ideas for better dealing with the situation and coping as a family. Express and share feelings. Exhibit empathy for family members. Be sensitive to the capacity of each family member to deal with strong feelings. Cry together. Encourage family members to write about their experiences in a journal. Share your desire to accept the will of God.

When my wife Juanita was diagnosed with breast cancer the first time, we struggled with how, where, when, and how much to tell the children. We finally decided that the crisis was so big we needed everyone in the family to be part of the team to deal with it. We first sat the older children on the couch and sensitively but directly told them the facts, the size of the tumor, the prognosis, the treatment and its side effects, etc. We spent almost an hour explaining the situation and answering every question honestly. There were a
lot of tears. The hardest question was whether or not Mom would get over the cancer. We told them we honestly didn't know what would happen, but we had a strong conviction that we could be an eternal family in the presence of God.

We then told the younger children in a shorter, more concise manner, more in harmony with their developmental stages. When we told our four-year old Seth that Mommy was very sick, he just laughed. With a chuckle he said, “Mommy’s don’t get sick.” That’s what we wished too. That’s what we wished with all our hearts. Then we prayed together the most sincere prayer in the history of our family, amidst a lot of sobbing and sniffing. We felt a deep sense of peace and comfort wash over us in this trying time.

After the prayer Seth pointed his finger at us and admonished, “No more crying!” His action released the tension and we all laughed and laughed, until we cried some more. This was just the beginning of our trial, but by sharing openly with family members we set the stage for family growth and a reservoir of strength to deal with the extreme difficulties that lay ahead.

3. SEEK OUTSIDE RESOURCES AND SUPPORT. Look to extended family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, church leaders, support groups, professional counselors, scriptures, books, the Internet, and other resources. They can all help in different ways. However, be selective in the resources you use. Find a family that has successfully dealt with the trial you are experiencing. Visit with them and learn from their example. Use them as mentors.

4. DEVELOP A LONG-TERM, GROWTH-ORIENTED PERSPECTIVE. See the trial as an opportunity for the family to grow and develop. Look for the positive aspects of the stressful events. Be mindful of what your family needs to learn from this adversity. Note and share even seemingly insignificant steps of learning and progress. Celebrate small victories with family members. Find the meaning in your trials. Count your blessings with your family. Be grateful for all that does go right. Remember T.T.T. (Things Take Time).

5. TAKE POSITIVE ACTION, DO WHAT YOU CAN. When family adversity strikes, it tends to envelop us completely. Sometimes we feel a sense of helplessness. A key to finding peace in trying times is to go out and take positive action. Don’t dwell on what you can’t do, but move forward in what you can do.

Emily Pearl Kingsley (1987) gave birth to and raised a child with a serious disability. This child took much of her time and emotional energy. She tells the following story about her experience and I believe it captures very well the point of focusing on what you can do, and not dwelling on what you can’t do.

Welcome to Holland

When you’re going to have a baby, it’s like planning a fabulous vacation trip - to Italy. You buy a bunch of guide books and make your wonderful plans. The Coliseum. Michelangelo’s David. The gondolas in Venice. You may learn some handy phrases in Italian. It’s all very exciting. After months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go. Several hours later, the plane lands. The stewardess comes in and says, “Welcome to Holland.”

“Holland??” you say. “What do you mean Holland?? I signed up for Italy! I’m supposed to be in Italy. All my life I’ve dreamed of going to Italy.” But there’s been a change in the flight plan. They’ve landed in Holland and there you must stay. The important thing is that they haven’t taken you to a horrible, disgusting, filthy place, full of pestilence, famine, and disease. It’s just a different place. So you must go out and buy new guide books. And you must learn a whole new language. And you will meet a whole new group of people you would never have met. It’s just a different place. It’s slower paced than Italy, less flashy than Italy. But after you’ve been there for a while and you catch your breath, you look around…, and you begin to notice that Holland has windmills…, and Holland has tulips. Holland even has Rembrandts.

But everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy… and they’re all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there. And for the rest of your life, you will say “Yes, that’s where I was supposed to go. That’s what I had planned.” And the pain of that will never, ever, ever go away…, because the loss of that dream is a very, very significant loss. But… if you spend your life mourning
the fact that you didn't get to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things... about Holland.

While undergoing cancer treatment, there were lots of things Juanita couldn't do. She had always been a very active woman, with a full calendar. Now it wasn't safe for her to be in public, she couldn't go to church, she couldn't go shopping, she couldn't go to the dentist. She could have wallowed in self-pity, but she didn't. When I'd come home from work she'd comment, "Isn't it great that I now have the time to get the family photo albums up to date? And aren't we blessed that I have the time to read Seth stories for hours every day?"

Concentrate on what you can do, not what you can't do.

6. Find comfort in everyday family life. In the midst of family trials we may become so disoriented that we stop doing the everyday things that have fortified our families in the past. We must make the effort to continue everyday life. It is comforting to join together for family dinner each evening and then do the dishes together. Plant and care for a garden. Weeding the garden together can be therapeutic and provide the context for needed family communication. Continue to engage in wholesome family recreation. Go camping together. Play games together. Go to an amusement park or a movie together. These activities can provide your family space away from the trial in which you may gain some perspective. Go on fun vacations. Continue to celebrate birthdays and holidays. Doing the day-to-day things brings comfort and patience as you endure the affliction.

7. Seek out soul-soothing environments. Go for a family hike along a mountain stream in a forest filled with songbirds. Play soothing music in your home. Read poetry and uplifting literature. Use uplifting media.


9. Trust in a Higher Power. Research demonstrates the importance of faith in dealing with stress. My religious tradition has taught me to pray often, and look to God in my every thought. I believe that as you become reconciled to God, you grow to become more like Him and your capacities multiply. You are developing faith, humility, purity, charity, and compassion through this trial.

During Juanita's cancer treatment, I took the opportunity to pray more frequently with my children and plead with God in behalf of their mother. Often times I would kneel with a child and each of us would offer a prayer. We often shared tears together. Seth would pray sincerely, "Please bless that my Mommy will get better." I felt strongly that the Lord was listening to this son's prayers.

10. Endure to the end. Become more charitable, more service-oriented, and more compassionate to the needs and suffering of others. Be patient. Jettison all bitterness. Be thankful for what you have learned through this trial. Life is hard, but your family can do hard things. Rejoice when the trial has passed.

Remember: "Pain is inevitable, but misery is optional." – Barbara Johnson

I hope these ten suggestions are helpful to you in making sense of, and dealing with family crucibles. It is my sincere belief that though we cannot control what circumstances may befall ourselves or our families, we can control our response to those circumstances. Remember that life is hard, but we can do hard things. It may be true that pain is inevitable, but misery is certainly optional.

In this article, I have used personal examples of how our family has dealt with adversity, especially Juanita's cancer. The good news is that after nine-months of treatment and major surgery, Juanita went into remission. The bad news is that after a year and a half the cancer relapsed and her prognosis is not positive. Yet this crucible has indeed changed our family in many positive ways. We are much more sincere in our prayers. We have a much greater recognition of how fragile life is. We are so very, very grateful for the blessing of health. We appreciate every day of life we have together. We have learned to not put things off, but to do them while we have the chance. We all recognize what is most important. We are much
closer to God. These are all wonderful blessings for which we are grateful.

Though family life is like an elevator with many ups and downs, you can find peace in trying times if you remember three things. Family life is hard, but with the help of God, you can do hard things. When things don't go as planned, make the best of it. And remember that often the changes most important in family life take a long time, so we must be patient and remind ourselves of T.T.T.—things take time.

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References
Some of my ideas come from two chapters in the book, Strengthening our Families: An In-Depth Look at the Proclamation on the Family (Carroll, Robinson, Marshall, Callister, Olsen, Dyches, & Mandleco, 2000; Pehrson, Thursby, & Olson, 2000). This book was produced by the School of Family Life and edited by David Dollahite. It contains input from more than 100 family scholars.

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