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Celeste Elain Witt
elain@att.net

Elizabeth A. Pinborough

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Speaking with Purpose and Peace: An Interview with Elain Witt

Celeste Elain Witt and Elizabeth Pinborough

Celeste Elain Witt (elain@att.net) is a professor in the Theatre and Media Arts Department at Brigham Young University. Sister Witt earned a BA in American studies from Chapman University and an MA in mass communication from BYU. In 2005 she published a book titled Amen: Speaking in Church with Purpose and Peace, an in-depth look at how to write an effective, inspiring sacrament meeting talk. Included after the interview is a talk by the author titled "Miracle of the Shredded Wheat."

Elizabeth Pinborough is a graduate in English literature from BYU.

Pinborough: *How did you come up with the idea for Amen? Is it based on your own experiences of speaking in public?*

Witt: The most interesting thing about when I began as a public speaker was that the first time I ever spoke at the pulpit, it was a complete and total disaster. Many people would take that disaster as an indication that they should never speak again. Every time they reflect on it they can actually call up all the feelings associated with it. One of the things I teach my students is how to rid themselves of what I call the ghost of speeches past—much like the Ghost of Christmas Past, except worse. The ghost of speeches past is every bad, negative, unfortunate experience you have ever had standing before an audience that for some reason we bring with us up to the front of the room whenever we speak. We remember the time our notes were in the wrong order or the times we could not find the right scripture, we got confused, we got tongue-tied, or someone laughed at a part that we did not think was funny. We bring those instances with us and in so doing prepare ourselves to basically be paralyzed, both emotionally and physically. If that happens, then we are not going to do a good job, and then we say, "This proves I am not a speaker. That is not something I do."

You can take any group of Latter-day Saints and ask them, "What

are some of the things you do well in the Church?” and very few people say, “You know, I am particularly gifted at speaking. I can stand before any group and share with them my testimony and riveting stories from the scriptures and from my own life that seem to have an influence on their lives.” We don’t usually hear people say this, and I asked myself why this is so since I had my own bad experience to reflect on. What makes a great speaker in sacrament meeting? Every once in a while, you and I will be sitting in sacrament meeting and someone will stand and speak and we’ll say, “That was wonderful! That was compelling. I want to go out and change my life. I want to add that to my testimony. I want to build on that. I am so grateful for the depth of insight that person shared.” But how often does that happen? That’s really where the book *Amen* came from.

While I have been teaching at BYU and discussing public speaking with my students, a number of them have said, “There isn’t a book out there about speaking in church.” Every time someone stands before the pulpit I want it to be fabulous, not because I want it to be fabulous for the speaker but because I want it to be fabulous for the people sitting in the pews. And the only way for it to be fabulous for them is for speakers to know how to prepare and to know how to make it a great experience.

Pinborough: What are some characteristics of a good talk?

Witt: A good talk in sacrament meeting—I use a number of models in my book—needs to be delicious. It needs to nourish the soul. I think that we’ve gotten away from that. I love general conference because the General Authorities, the Apostles, and the First Presidency have such a deep conviction that what they are sharing is important, and they frame that conviction in a way we can latch onto it. We listen to general conference, and we are transformed. Then we attend our meetings for the next six months, and they somehow don’t seem to measure up. But there isn’t any reason we couldn’t be giving the same kind of sermons. We have the same Holy Spirit, and the question is, what price are we willing to pay to create something really wonderful and memorable?

What if you knew that the next time the bishop called on you to speak, it would be the last time you would ever be asked to speak? What if the Church suddenly grew so large that this talk was your one time to share a message of significance, value, and spiritual depth with your brothers and sisters in your ward, whom you love deeply? What we need to do as a Church family is give sacrament meeting talks more credit, more importance, so that when you are called upon, you are not whining for the next two weeks, “I can’t believe I have to speak

in sacrament meeting.” But we should have the attitude that we have been selected by the Lord to share this message with our brothers and sisters and that speaking in sacrament meeting is a privilege. As soon as you sense it to be a privilege, even if you’re nervous about it, think of the kind of energy and personal conviction you would add, the depth of research and personal searching you would do.

Now the questions you ask are basically the framework of what you share. Many times we are tempted to start by saying, “What is the first thing I can think of that fits this assignment? What can I find that will make it so that I can fill the twelve, fifteen, or twenty minutes I have been assigned?” If the model we’re looking for is to fill the time, then we have really not fulfilled the assignment because the Lord sees it more as a stewardship. You have been entrusted with a certain group of people, for a certain period of time, with a specific message given to you by a member of the bishopric. If you can also see this as a stewardship, then the focus is no longer on yourself. But doubt is a real temptation: “I am afraid. I am nervous. I am unprepared. I am lacking.” The Lord knows all that, and when we turn to Him, He turns every one of our weaknesses into strengths. Now if we try to do it ourselves and rely on the arm of flesh, then it can become a disaster.

What I try to teach my students and to live myself is to imagine receiving that message. So, as you are working with the topic—perhaps you have been given a simple topic like honoring the Sabbath—imagine being in the pew and hearing your message. What is it that the people who are in that room need to receive that only you can give them? That changes how you address the topic. Rather than just going to www.lds.org, typing in “honor the Sabbath,” and seeing what the last three conference talks on that issue were, you should read them, cut out the best quotes, use the best scriptures—use the jigsaw method of putting together a talk. It takes longer this way, but you start sensing, “What if there were people there that really needed to be nudged to a higher level of honoring the Sabbath? What if someone’s testimony of honoring the Sabbath is sort of dangling, and they don’t really see any value in it?” How deep would you search knowing that your job might very well be to rescue a soul that you were not even aware of? And that’s where the power comes from, from giving a well-organized, well-researched, spiritually grounded, and inspired message.

As we break free of ourselves being the focus, we learn to become listener-focused rather than speaker-focused. A lot of the things that people grouse about really have to be set aside because a talk is not about the speaker. It’s about the opportunity to be an intermediary

between the audience's needs and a message that exists. You have the privilege of taking the pieces and putting them together in a way that will be acceptable and understandable to your audience.

Pinborough: How do we go about nourishing people through our talks? What can we do to prepare and enhance the nourishment we give them since it is nourishment only we can give?

Witt: First of all, we need to move away from the idea that we are information delivery systems. There are times where there is critical information that needs to be delivered that is just packaged for the talk. But when we feel like it's just a list of dos and don'ts, we don't respond very well. We don't even respond that well to long, unending passages of scriptures. And at some point we're sitting there thinking, "This is just a pile of random sound bytes." If someone gave a talk on tithing, I would want to hear how their life was transformed and how their commitment to the Savior was enhanced by writing that first check from their high school job, realizing they were surrendering 10 percent of money they earned, and they were invested in the kingdom of God. And I want to feel from a speaker how they were transformed and how that process can become a model for me, to strengthen me, to fortify me. And when it's imbued with spiritual depth, there simply is no question that the Lord is present in the communication. I love those moments when I feel that when that speaker sits down I know them better, I love them more, and my commitment to being faithful in the kingdom is enhanced.

What precious time sacrament meeting really is, when you have just partaken of the sacrament. If we use that time in the way we have been counseled to use it—to reflect on maybe where we failed this week—and do the introspection that we need to do and partake of sacred emblems to renew our relationship with the Savior, those can be powerful moments. We then look up to the pulpit, and we want to receive the pleasing word of God. We want to be lifted, we want to hear inspired texts, and we want to hear a message that really will meet our needs. It is absolutely critical to think about that whole room and say, "This is a room full of people who are hungry." I am thinking of a talk by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland that reflects on the fact that we all come to sacrament meeting hurt. We have all been wounded this last week by things that we have done and that other people have done to us. We come to sacrament meeting and are not there to be entertained. We are not even there necessarily to come to understand some deeper metaphorical analogy in the depths of Isaiah. We are there to recommit to follow the Savior.

Are speakers sometimes called upon to say things that call us to repentance? Of course, and that is why King Benjamin will always be my favorite. He knew it was his last talk, and he gathered everyone into the biggest general conference that had ever been assembled up to that point (I suspect we've probably passed it up by now). He gathered all these people together, and he didn't say to them, "You know, you're really pretty good. And I just want to let you know I love you. Keep doing the things you're doing." He was really bold. What happened at the end of his remarks is unparalleled anywhere in the scriptures. Everyone just basically said, "Wow. You're right. We have gotten off track, and we are totally convinced, based on the spiritual experience we've just had, to live according to the principles of the gospel. Give us more. Tell us more of what it is we need to do." And I appreciate the fact that he had written down his words because he was going to deliver them to those who weren't able to come or weren't able to hear because of the distance. It let me know that his words weren't just the ramblings of an old, inspired man. These were carefully thought-out messages that he knew would nourish that congregation.

Pinborough: How can personal experiences enhance the messages we give?

Witt: I love personal stories. Go to yourself as your first reference and just jot down every experience you have ever had in reference to your topic. It's amazing what some personal, spiritually enhanced brainstorming can do for you. You will be able to bring up things you didn't bother to record in your journal. All of a sudden things will pop up that you will be excited to write down, and you will be able to go back and recapture that moment. I have been teaching public speaking for eight years, and I still have stories I have never told any of my students. The power of the Spirit helps you recall things that are great, valuable, and applicable to your topic. And there may never be another opportunity to go back and recapture those stories. When you start doing that kind of brainstorming, make sure you write things down in detail because it may be the only record you have. It's amazing that we have any record of the First Vision at all. Joseph Smith made his first diary account twelve years after the experience. I think personal stories are powerful. Not all personal stories are appropriate from the pulpit, however. The Brethren have been clear that we need to be selective on what kind of personal stories we share or to what degree we share. Sometimes you can be somewhat vague in describing certain details that are unnecessary but still capture the essence of the story. For most people, the stories are what captivate them—scriptural, historical, or

personal. Never just get up and wing a story. I see returned missionaries do this. It can go on way too long, and it can tread into areas you have not thought through carefully. Maybe there was a deeper, personal spiritual experience that is not appropriate for the pulpit, but you may suddenly find yourself sharing it and you do not know how to rewind. When using a personal story, decide really clearly what your point is, how much detail you want to include, and how long the story should be. Know what the last sentence of the story is so you can move on to the next part of your talk. There is nothing more awkward than a story that feels not quite wrapped up. When using personal stories, craft them carefully with the audience in mind for the purpose that you want that story to serve. Interesting enough, a story can actually serve multiple purposes. The same process can be seen from different angles.

Pinborough: Is it best for people to write out every word they are going to say? Or should they write out portions of their talks, or write an outline of their talks?

Witt: Manuscript delivery has its place just like outline delivery does. Let's look at why we would choose one over the other. I would say that for sacrament meeting probably 80 percent of those who speak use full manuscript delivery. Every word they are going to say has been written out and carefully selected. And what happens most of the time is that they then feel tied to that piece of paper and read their entire talk. First of all, manuscript delivery is essential when timing is critical—the shorter the talk, the more important manuscript delivery can be. So if you only have three minutes and you go up there with just two main points and a scripture on a piece of paper, chances are you will not go three minutes, you will go eight minutes because you get up there and you try to feel like it's full and wrapped up and you go over time. We should honor the amount of time that is given to us, and manuscript delivery can be critical in doing that. Second, if your ideas are complex—and sometimes they can be and still work in sacrament meeting—you will need manuscript delivery. Third, when word choice is important, manuscript delivery can be important. For sacrament meeting, most of us depend on manuscripts too much, however.

Let's look at the other option of just fashioning an outline. There are a lot of people who can speak from just an outline—speak from the sparsest of notes and still give a compelling and spiritually energizing message. These are mostly people who speak often. Where does it work for those of us who do not speak often yet do not want to be tied to a manuscript? Now we're moving more into the model of delivery. So

it is not so much what is on the piece of paper but what is going on inside your brain. For delivery I recommend a hybrid between manuscript and outline. I recommend that your introduction be extremely carefully crafted. The audience decides in a matter of seconds if you are someone to be listened to. Now that is going to happen during the introduction. It is not going to happen later on. You are going to have to capture them in those first few precious seconds. And the way you are going to do that is by looking at them. So I want you to write out a wonderful introduction and have it with you because you are not going to feel confident if you do not have those words in front of you. But you are going to know it so well and have devoted enough time to it that you will never need to look at it. You will deliver it as if it is the thirteenth article of faith, and it is just flowing out of you. When people have that as the first few seconds of a sacrament meeting talk immediately the congregation will sit up, take notice, and think, “Hey, something important is going to happen here. The speaker is looking at me. They are delivering words that I can see were carefully chosen to get me interested in this topic. I am going to pay attention.” Having it written out in your notes is what I call insurance because a talk that starts out well will be fine. Once you get rolling, the spiritual energy moves into you. And if we get off to a bumpy start, it may take another couple of minutes to get your stride, so you want to start out strong.

Inasmuch as it is humanly possible, it would be great if the body of the talk can either be in an outline or just key phrases that you want to express. I believe your conclusion, however, should be written down. I admit, as Latter-day Saints we are not really good at conclusions. And I think it is a cultural habit because we already know what the last few words of our talks are going to be. So we already know how to stop; we have a way to end our talk. But we don’t know how to do that part right before the end very well. It’s really clear that the Brethren in general conference give us fabulous examples by bearing clear and fervent testimony of the principle they have just taught. They don’t bring in extraneous issues. They just remain laser-focused right up to the end. Does that come spontaneously? Is that just something they make up on the spot? No, it’s something they’ve thought about and crafted in a way they know will communicate to us what it is we need to hear so the Holy Ghost can testify of its truth. I think it is powerful to bear testimony at the conclusion of the talk, and I do not think it needs to be spontaneous for it to be sincere. Sometimes we will see someone reading through a manuscript talk, and suddenly they will look up to us and say, “Now I would like to bear my testimony to you.” And

then they bear what I call the “kitchen sink” testimony, the testimony of everything that is more speaker-centered than audience-centered. What we need is that final moment to help us anchor that message into our soul, and that is good to have written out. But once again, like the introduction, you will know it so well that you will be looking at the audience and sharing it as if it were spontaneous. It’s not acting; it’s preparation.

Miracle of the Shredded Wheat

Celeste Elaine Witt

What does a miracle look like? Is it possible that you had one this week, but you missed it? Quite simply, a miracle is the evidence of the hand of God in your life. “Miracles should not be regarded as deviations from the ordinary course of nature so much as manifestations of divine or spiritual power.”¹ More than solving specific problems, they are designed to increase our faith in God.

In a hectic world of bits and bytes, maybe recognizing miracles is simply a matter of slowing down and becoming more keenly aware of the loving and ever-present hand of God. Many divine interventions go unnoticed. Yet every time we acknowledge and appreciate them, our faith increases.

A simple four-step process helps us appreciate each miracle in our lives:

1. See it.
2. Express gratitude for it.
3. Allow it to increase your faith.
4. Record it.

A fifth step comes into play when you share the miracle with your posterity. The Holy Ghost will confirm the truth of it to the generations that follow you. An unbroken chain of faithfulness comes from family members who see and testify of the hand of God. Nephi did. Laman and Lemuel did not. It is a consistent pattern throughout the scriptures.

Moroni warned this generation to be careful not to ignore the hand of God. “Deny not the power of God; for he worketh by power, according to the faith of the children of men, the same today and tomorrow, and forever” (Moroni 10:7).

What might have been viewed as a mere clerical error by some has always been considered a miracle in our family.

It was the summer of 1990 in Redmond, Washington. As a young mother of four (with a fifth on the way), I innocently bought one of those giant boxes of Shredded Wheat. Those were tough times financially, and we stretched every penny. Even cold cereal was a luxury.

While unloading the groceries, I noticed that one of the interior packages of the cereal box was not completely sealed. In today's troubling times, you think twice about a package that is even slightly out of the ordinary. So I loaded up the kids and returned the Shredded Wheat to Costco for a new box. End of story? One would think so.

Six months later the same thing happened. With a new baby in my arms, I was not as willing to jump back in the van to return it. So I gave the marketing office of Costco a telephone call. They agreed it was rather peculiar that I would have purchased two defective boxes. It was time to investigate. They would have an executive from Nabisco give me a call.

Several days passed and someone in the breakfast cereal division of Nabisco phoned to tell me that a representative would be by to collect the faulty box, complete with its computer encoding so they could discover how quality control let it slip through. Sure enough, two well-dressed gentlemen arrived on my porch with treasures in hand—some jam, salsa, trash bags, room freshener, and . . . some Shredded Wheat. Only one problem—it was a standard-sized box. When I handed them my huge Costco box, they winced. There had obviously been some horrible miscommunication. They assured me they would arrange for a Costco-sized box to be shipped to me immediately. Isn't this every mother's dream—home delivery of cold cereal?

A week later, just after I had stepped out of the shower, the doorbell rang. I threw on some clothes, and with hair dripping wet, I answered the door. A scruffy but pleasant man in a delivery uniform looked at me rather strangely and announced, "I have your Shredded Wheat."

"Great," I said, "Nabisco told me they were sending me a box."

With a grin the delivery man replied, "No ma'am, I mean, I have some Shredded Wheat for you."

"One of those big boxes, right?" There was an awkward silence.

"You don't seem to understand—I have an entire pallet."

"A what?"

"It's 120 of those huge boxes."

Dumbfounded, I fumbled for words. "There's got to be some

mistake. Shouldn't I send them back?"

"Are you kidding? It would cost Nabisco more to ship them back than the cereal is worth."

As I continued to drip-dry in the middle of my front yard, I watched a delivery man unload 450 pounds of Shredded Wheat into my garage. Now, I'm a devoted fan of Shredded Wheat—but that's definitely more than a year's supply. Tears came to my eyes as I sensed the blessing this could be. I never sold one box. I never traded one box. And I never wasted one little biscuit. They were a miraculous gift from the Lord.

The challenge, as I saw it, was to take this unexpected windfall and make it bless as many lives as possible. I delivered boxes to ward members who were sad. I delivered some to neighbors whom I wanted to fellowship. I delivered some to the local food bank. As I spread joy through delivering boxes of cold cereal, I saw a real fulfillment of the counsel to "cast thy bread upon the waters" (Ecclesiastes 11:1). Who would have guessed it applied to Shredded Wheat?



As a result of the Miracle of the Shredded Wheat, gratitude ensued and good works abounded. Many were fed and blessed, and faith increased in our household.

Miracles rarely come in the way we expect. The house of Israel had manna. We had Shredded Wheat. **RE**

Notes

1. Bible Dictionary, "Miracles," 732.