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The Temple, Psychotherapy, and the Traditions of the Fathers*

Wendy L. Ulrich, PhD

I suppose that every psychologist has at least one patient whose difficulties are sufficiently pervasive and obstinate as to engender serious doubts about the therapist's own professional competence and spiritual discernment. I had such a patient for a brief time—a young man whose obsessive-compulsive behavior was so rampant that he had sunk to a life-threatening level of despondency and hopelessness. His perfectionistic requirements for himself were so rigid that seeking help was extraordinarily threatening; however, I soon discovered something even more threatening to his fragile sense of self when I attempted to gather a simple history of his background and upbringing.

"Leave my parents out of this," he stated. "My parents are wonderful people who did everything possible for us. They have nothing to do with my problems." All of my explanations about the possible usefulness of such information in his treatment availed nothing. His determination to protect his parents from, as he perceived it, the intrusive, accusing eye of psychotherapy prevailed. I never learned any more about his parents, and his therapy took a different course, which was both short-lived and relatively unproductive.

*This paper is a modified version of an article that appeared in Sunstone, November 1991.
The desire to protect even unrighteous parents from incriminating insinuations of others is particularly poignant in the LDS culture. Our reverence for family is almost legendary; we even ascribe a kind of spiritual status to lineage and ancestral blessings. Within such a culture it is not easy to define the role of psychotherapeutic processes exploring the impact of painful childhood experiences on current mental health. However, the restoration of the gospel through Joseph Smith includes important information and concepts relevant to this topic. The gospel affirms our opportunity and obligation to explore our own lives and the lives of our ancestors for information that will assist us in rejoicing in our mortal journey.

**Baptism for the Dead**

Joseph Smith’s statement that baptism for the dead constitutes the “most glorious of all subjects belonging to the everlasting gospel” (Doctrine and Covenants 128:17) has struck me as curious. Given the vast array of doctrines and practices of the gospel, including those unique to Mormondom, baptism for the dead does not come first to my mind as the “most glorious.” While Joseph’s intention with this statement is not completely clear, his superlative suggests that the significance of this ordinance extends even beyond the obvious function of providing the opportunity for all to be baptized.

John A. Widtsoe once declared that if we are to be truly empowered by temple ordinances—of which baptism for the dead is fundamental—then we must see “beyond the symbol, the mighty realities for which the symbol stands” (Utah Genealogical Magazine, 12:62). I have concluded that temple work for the dead symbolizes “mighty realities” beyond the powerful symbols the same ordinances imply for the living. The ordinance of baptism for the dead embodies a rich and instructive symbol that serves the process of making peace with our parents and our culture—“welding [the] link . . . between the fathers and the children” (Doctrine and Covenants 128:18).

The most obvious reason for the ordinance of baptism for the dead is to provide everyone with the opportunity of accepting the
gospel of Christ. Baptism suggests death and burial of the sinful self and a rebirth process through which one takes the name of Jesus Christ, accepts him as a personal Savior, and is reborn under his spiritual parentage. The ordinance abundantly symbolizes the death and resurrection of Christ, and, through Christ, of all Adam's posterity. It further symbolizes the cleansing and purifying of the inner self. It reflects prerequisite processes of faith and repentance, a covenant to remember Christ and keep his commandments, and submission to his authorized servants.

All of these concepts are equivalently symbolized by the ordinance of baptism for the dead. Consequent to our redeeming work on their behalf and their acceptance of the ordinance performed for them, they are released from spirit prisons to continue their spiritual progression.

In Joseph Smith's time, the Saints could serve as proxies only for their own dead ancestors and family members (Smith, 1970, pp. 179, 191, 201). Quoting Malachi, Joseph explicitly delineated the purpose of genealogical research and temple work for the dead as "turn[ing] the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:6). Joseph further explained that "their salvation is necessary to our salvation, as Paul says concerning the fathers—that they without us cannot be made perfect—neither can we without our dead be made perfect" (Doctrine and Covenants 128:15-18).

Powerful symbolism pervades the ordinance of baptism for one's kindred dead—symbolism beyond that inherent in the ordinance for the living. Specifically, baptism for the dead represents the critical, celestial process of cleansing and forgiving our ancestors' sins in our own lives. By participating in this ordinance we both make the Atonement available to them, and personally accept the Atonement for their sins which have been visited on us.

**Spirit Prisons**

We take upon us our ancestors' sins both as innocent victims of their transgressions and perpetrators of their erroneous ways (Broderick, 1989). But through the ordinance of baptism for the dead we pronounce our willingness to have our kindred and our
culture forgiven for those sins. It symbolizes our personal covenant to repent of their sins as well as our own and stop the transmission of those sins. In short, baptism for the dead symbolizes the combined power of human repentance and Christ’s Atonement in breaking the intergenerational cycles of sin and transgression, perfecting both parent and child in the process.

As we participate in this ordinance we symbolically release our forebears from three kinds of spirit prisons: (1) The spirit prisons of our judgments and animosity toward them, even though we have suffered innocently because of their transgressions; (2) The spirit prisons of their own guilt and pain as they view with eternal perspective the negative results of their sins in our lives; and, (3) The spiritual chains that prevent them from completing their efforts to repent. They can no longer influence nor make restitution for the unrighteousness in our lives that we have learned from them. We symbolically allow them to complete the process of repentance by our recognition of their sins, our regret of them, our resolve not to allow them to be passed on to yet another generation, our lives of restitution and renewal. We become, in powerful ways, saviors on Mt. Zion on behalf of dead forebears who await our redeeming work.

**Sins of the Parents and the Atonement of Christ**

According to the Pearl of Great Price, these celestial principles have been taught since the time of Adam. Adam was taught that baptism was institutionalized as a symbol of the atonement of Christ, and that it is through the atonement of Christ that “the sins of the parents cannot be answered upon the heads of the children” (Moses 6:54, emphasis added). Not only Adam’s transgression, but also the sins of all parents are specifically included in the atonement of Christ. Although we suffer under the mortal consequences of the transgression of Adam and Eve and the sins of our parents, we are promised that—through the Atonement—those consequences need not be eternal. As baptism affirms the power of Christ’s Atonement in our personal lives the sins of our parents “cannot be” answered upon our heads. We may be
punished for our own sins, but not for the tacit, ingrained habits, and unconscious replications of our parents’ transgressions.

Inevitably, we are subject to the consequences of our parents’ choices and to the wise and foolish patterns of living they teach us. Continuing with Moses 6:55, we are “conceived in sin” (the sinful context of our parents’ lives), and as we grow “sin conceiveth in [our] hearts” as we learn the sinful patterns of previous generations. Just as we must endure the mortal consequences of Adam’s transgression, so do the transgressions of our immediate forebears also provide an indispensable context for our growth and learning—we “taste the bitter, that [we] may know how to prize the good.”

Within the confines of this mortal training we experience a wide variety in the amount and kind of parental transgression through which we must work. The transgressions of some parents may be limited to occasional impatience and normal inexperience. Others may learn more damaging habits at their parents’ hands—abuse, negligence, dishonesty, and addiction. These great evils are part of the world of opposites we have voluntarily come to earth to experience and overcome. Other phases of our immortal journey (in the pre-mortal worlds) have provided us with ample experience with good, but with minimal experience with the stinging, bitter consequences of evil. Overall, mortality is constructed to minimize the possibility that we will experience too little of evil to make informed choices, although, unfortunately, many of us will experience too little of good. In fact, there have been occasions when there is so much evil and so little goodness operating that children would grow up without true choices about their behavior. When such is the case, wholesale destruction is ordained by God because the purposes of mortality are being thwarted. At the other extreme, Enoch’s society developed to the point where so little evil remained and where good so dominated that the purposes of mortality were also transcended and God translated the whole society to a different state (Moses 7:21).

The critical element of choice is essential to our learning about the nature and consequences of evil. Even if we attain the increased power of exaltation, God will not, and cannot, force us
to use the power attained for good. Choice will always be before us. We must learn by our own experience to choose good not simply because it is the godly “thing to do,” but also because we deeply understand and value it. This earthly realm is apparently the only one in which sufficient uncertainty permeates our existence to allow us to make our choices based on what we have truly learned to value, rather than on the reigning paradigm of whomever has the most power—even if that is God. Such values are forged in the fire of our own often painful experience and observation of the consequences of good and evil in human life.

These values are apparently of such import that God conspicuously resists interfering with our choices while in this probation, even when they have remarkably painful consequences in the lives of innocent others. However, his plan ensures that the innocent can ultimately be freed from those consequences through the Atonement, and that our eternal fate will be determined by our own intentions and choices and not the unconsciously acquired transgressions of our parents, our ancestors, or our cultures.

Although the sins of the parents vary, common themes recur. I conclude that these common themes represent false principles critical to our eternal understanding of true principles. These include the evils of unrighteous dominion, neglect, greed, fear of opinions of others, pride, retaliation, deceit, self-pity, and addiction. Experience with these evil realities is critical to our eternal valuing and choosing of agency, compassion, sacrifice, trust, humility, mercy, integrity, dignity, and discipline. Apparently all of us need seasoning in both ends of this continuum to learn by our own experience good from evil.

Perhaps when we consider the repeated scriptural warning that the sins of the parents are visited on the heads of the children to “the third and fourth generation of them that hate me” (Exodus 20:5), it is not accidental that we are specifically enjoined to begin our genealogical research by completing work for the four generations immediately preceding us. Nor is it accidental that family history, not genealogy alone, is the recently reiterated goal of our research. Our assigned task does not consist in simply completing temple ordinances; we are to keep journals, write family histories,
seek information about the lives and choices of our ancestors and pass such information about our own lives on to our posterity. By so doing we begin to recognize the patterns in our own lives that echo the sins and blessings of our parents’ lives, that we humbly share credit for our moral successes, and awaken awareness of our learned and inherited predispositions for moral failure. Thus, even though the consequences of our parents’ sins are visited upon us, we can be assured that the responsibility for them will not be. “The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin” (Deuteronomy 24:16).

**Justice and Mercy**

Just as baptism can occur as either initiation or culmination of the process of being born again, so participation in ordinances of baptism for the dead does not presume that we have completed (or even begun) the process of making peace with our ancestors and repenting of sinful patterns learned from them. The “mighty realities” represented by baptism for the dead rightly “belongeth to my house” (D&C 124:30) because they are celestial principles of considerable magnitude.

Where our parents have been righteous and emotionally healthy, making peace with them may be a reasonably straightforward process. Where there have been more serious problems, releasing parents from spirit prisons of our own and their making can be strenuous and painful—a task not for neophytes in things of the Spirit. This “graduate course” in intra- and inter-personal relations appropriately belongs to the spiritual university of the House of the Lord. Nevertheless, the command to repent goes to all, for all humans are “lost, because of the transgression of their parents” (2 Nephi 2:21).

People who struggle with intergenerational conflict seem to follow a consistent path in identifying and resolving the sins of their ancestors. Two great milestones along this path can be identified as two vital characteristics of God and godhood: justice and mercy.
The principle of justice requires an honest appraisal of our current symptoms and the realities of our pain. Denying our parents’ sins is no more healthy nor helpful than denying our own. Justice requires a gathering of evidence about the impact of parental actions on our lives. Sometimes the damaging consequences of parental transgression are fairly easy to identify and feel. At other times transgressions are more subtle and difficult to discern. Looking for repeated patterns of problems in our own lives and examining childhood memories assist us in identifying painful emotions that provide clues to the nature and extent of parental sins and transgressions. To forgive prematurely can close the doors to the important realities that painful affect can open. It is by experiencing the painful consequences of others’ sins that we shape our own values and clarify our efforts not to repeat them.

Justice requires us to fully acknowledge a balanced perspective that mediates between our own contributions to problems and the contributions of others. Justice further requires that we not assume responsibility for sins we have not committed, that we not assume power to control decisions we cannot control, and that we not exonerate others’ actions when they are dangerous and destructive. To attempt to be merciful in the absence of justice is to deny the characteristics which make God God.

The principle of mercy follows the principle of justice, but cannot rob it. To forgive others in a merciful fashion is not to condone their sins or place a vote of approbation upon that which causes pain and dysfunction. To forgive is to trust in God’s ultimate justice for wrongdoing, and to believe that he, also, condemns the sins that have caused us wrongful suffering. Mercy further assists us in taking responsibility for our own lives, encouraging us away from the safe but powerless domains of blame or one-sided perspectives. Mercy allows peace to come to us as forgivers as we enlarge our understanding of all contributors, take action on our own behalf, and extend to others the mercy we would claim for ourselves through the Atonement of Christ. The forgiver leaves to God the sorting out of responsibility and intentionality, acknowledging others’ circumstances and agency, and
accepting any and all good consequences that have come from our relationships, just as we have acknowledged the evil.

**Denial—Confession**

People often recognize that problems they struggle with have roots in parental injunctions. Some readily identify the pain in their lives that results from unresolved conflicts with home, but for many these painful feelings have been minimized or buried in order to proceed with life. Many blame themselves for the problems, citing the apparent success of siblings or acquaintances from similar backgrounds as evidence that the “true” problems lie not with upbringing—but with their own eternal nature. People are often very aware that thinking about family dynamics is painful and provokes much anxiety, anger, depression, or guilt. Increased awareness of painful consequences of their parents’ choices may feel to some like a betrayal of their parents.

A variety of defenses protect us from this increased awareness, or this “betrayal” of our parents. We may decide it is better to keep such painful feelings buried or “on the shelf.” We may deflect the feelings in the numbing effects of activity, excitement, alcohol, or depression. We may bury unpleasant memories that have little obvious relevance to the present. We may divert the pain into excessive and senseless anxiety or guilt. Alternatively, our acknowledgment of pain may include excessive or one-sided blame, retaliation, or rejection, that can also serve to protect and blind us to the full and “just” reality of the complex family dance. For example, the parent whom we first identify as a problem to us is often a smokescreen for the deeper pathology engendered by the second parent (Klimek, 1991).

For healing to begin we must understand that we repeat the patterns of the past when we do not see them (Bowen, 1978; Hartman & Laird, 1989). We relinquish our agency to ignorance and fear. The purposes of mortality are thwarted because we do not grow in our understanding of good and evil when we are unwilling to taste the bitter of fully acknowledging our lives. We cease to be free agents, but continue despite our best efforts to pass to our children the negative paradigms under which we blindly
operate. While many aspects of our lives may be undermined, the greatest negative effects occur within our families. Efforts to change our dysfunctional behavior are thwarted. Even if we change outward behavior, deeper thoughts and beliefs continue to subtly yet powerfully influence our interactions. Buried feelings leak out in ways that appear mysterious, but are in fact quite predictable. Family therapists have long recognized that among the most powerful forces affecting family life are the conflicts and secrets that are never discussed (Bowen, 1978; Hartman & Laird, 1989). Acknowledgment of the reality of our parents' choices is a first step in making peace.

Sara, a young woman with three children, approached me for a consultation on how to handle her son, Scott, age 11, the oldest child. Scott's behavior was creating considerable turmoil for his entire family. He was frequently abusive to his siblings, hitting them, threatening them, and yelling at them. His moods dictated the emotional tone of the home. Everyone walked on eggshells to placate Scott and ward off his temper outbursts.

"When you are angry with the kids, how do you express it," I asked his mother. "What do you do with your anger?" She looked reflective for a moment and then responded somewhat sheepishly, "I probably yell, and then I threaten him, and if that doesn't work I guess I hit him." She then acknowledged that she had not previously recognized a connection between her expression of anger and her son's.

Exploring further I asked, "Whom in the family does Scott most remind you of?" She said that Scott reminded her of her father, to whom she had been very close before his death ten years previously. The resemblance in her mind included both Scott's tender, spiritual qualities, admired in her stake president father, and Scott's temper. Although Sara had never been the recipient of her father's outbursts, she had seen him send her older brother flying into a wall on one occasion, had repeatedly observed him hit another brother in the face, and had frequently heard angry comments that were belittling, cruel, and rejecting.
Sara became very uncomfortable when I labeled these behaviors abusive. “It really bothers me to hear you call my father abusive,” she stated. “He was a wonderful man with so many good qualities. I'm afraid I've given you the wrong impression.”

Despite Sara's recognition of the many spiritual qualities of her father, her unwillingness to acknowledge his sin of anger at face value and work through her feelings about it are perpetuating a continuation of abusive patterns in her own family and in successive generations. Although Sara may believe she is not as “hot-tempered” as her father was, her distorted perceptions of her own and others' anger colors her interpretations and responses in contexts arousing anger. The sins of her father are being visited upon the heads of his children and grandchildren in part because they are not being confessed, but denied.

Acknowledgment and “confession” of the sins of our parents is no more a betrayal of our parents than is acknowledgment and confession of our own sins a betrayal of our worth as a person. In both cases, confession is simply the first step in the process of overcoming the sin. It is an act of maturity, love, and honoring of that desire which is most deeply held by all true parents: that their children will succeed where they have failed. It is not focusing on the mote that is in another’s eye while failing to regard the beam that is in our own; rather it is to fully acknowledge the beams in our own eyes, grown there in response to the motes of others that distorted their perceptions and influenced their vision of us.

Prophets remind us of the importance of understanding our historical roots when they emphasize reading the scriptures, studying history, and doing family history research. When I read the Old Testament I used to be confused by the apparent favoritism, deceit, and dishonesty occasionally observed in the lives of the great prophets and their wives. I assumed that these faults were either being represented as virtues, or were being excused because of the status of the perpetrators. More recently I have come to the conclusion that these details are included so that we might learn from the failings of our righteous forefathers as well as from their spiritual triumphs. I find great comfort in the fact that these individuals are not represented as one-sided, faultless beings to
whom I cannot relate. I am thrilled to discover that God speaks to, and ultimately approves, such fallible kindred spirits. Just as reading the Old Testament forces the thoughtful reader to struggle with the sins and injustices of our spiritual forebears in ways that expand our understanding of the gospel, struggling with the sins of our personal forebears expands our understanding of ourselves and the values we will choose and live by.

Even when an individual trusts the therapist’s injunctions to review parental acts that were damaging, this process is often hampered by poor recall of early years. This is particularly likely when the early years have been traumatic. Therapeutic techniques that are helpful at this step include hypnosis, memory records, role playing, and backward arrow. The first is familiar to most readers, so I will comment only on the last three techniques.

**Memory records.** For individuals with few early memories, a useful exercise is to obtain 3" by 5" cards or a small journal in which the client records early memory fragments. The individual records recollections of the circumstances, the people involved, their responses, the emotions experienced, and the conclusions drawn from the experience. Clustering these memory records by age can provide clues as to the client’s conclusions during various developmental stages. Clustering them by similar emotions or conclusions provides an historical context for current choices. Early memories with relevance for current problems can be expanded into scripts or role plays for further exploration.

**Role playing.** Role playing remembered events is a particularly valuable therapeutic technique, allowing both therapist and client insight into the impact of early events on the individual. Where the early events include physical or sexual abuse, an absence of verbal interchange, or a large number of individuals, role playing may not be a comfortable vehicle for reconstructing them. In such cases the situation can be written as a script, in which the imagined thoughts of the people involved are portrayed, as well as any remembered dialogue.

I find many clients are initially reluctant to engage in role playing and have a difficult time immersing themselves in the role
as the affective impact of the situation becomes painful and overwhelming. Patience is warranted to encourage the effort, however, as this is one of the most powerful techniques for working through intergenerational pain.

A useful format for roleplaying is to have the client play the self while the therapist, with prompting, plays the parent. (This technique was presented at the Cognitive Therapy Conference in Newport Beach in 1989 by Aaron Beck and Susan Beyers). After the roleplay, the client is encouraged to report the feelings and conclusions experienced. Then the roles are switched, after which both client and therapist talk about the feelings they experienced.

Clients often find it very affirming to realize that the feelings the therapist experienced playing the client as a child are quite similar to the feelings they experienced at the time. Also, clients often gain new perspective on the parent’s behavior, and the parent’s excessive power is diminished by taking their role. Once the therapist has a clear idea of how the parent behaved, the initial role play may be repeated to allow further immersion in the feelings of the time. Experiencing these feelings is critical to the therapeutic steps that follow.

Backward arrow. The downward arrow technique in cognitive therapy takes a statement or conclusion of the client and continues to ask, “And if that were true, what would that mean to you?” or “What is so bad about that?” until basic assumptions are uncovered. The backward arrow looks for historical precedents for current feelings. As a current concern is identified, the therapist asks “Can you think of an earlier time when you had a similar conflict or feeling? What happened then? Are there any other, earlier times?” The earliest remembered events becomes the basis of the role play script.

Retasting the Bitter—Prizing the Good

Making peace with painful experiences from the past requires us to fully re-experience these painful feelings, to identify them, to correctly associate them with their original perpetrators, and to acknowledge and learn from them. The Atonement of Christ involved the suffering of an innocent individual for the sins of
another in order that those sins might not have eternal consequences. In like fashion, we become saviors on Mount Zion when we are willing to suffer again as innocents the feelings of despair, pain, rejection, and anxiety inflicted during our childhood, but which we found too overwhelming at that time to integrate. To do this we must emotionally "become as little children . . . submissive, meek, humble, patient, . . . willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father" (Mosiah 3:18–19). We re-experience that pain against which we felt no choice but to psychologically defend when young. Re-experiencing the pain plays an essential part in releasing ourselves, our parents, and our children from the spirit prisons of previously unattended ancestral sins.

It is no wonder that we shrink from such a task and wish to avoid it. I believe the Atonement of Christ included this kind of pain—a bitter cup from which even Christ wished he could shrink and not partake. Yet he partook, "and finished" that cup (Doctrine and Covenants 19:18), experiencing fully the soul-tearing, God-forsaken, and totally undeserved anguish of the innocent for the sins of all parents, in all ages of time. He invites us to share a taste of that experience with him as we repent for those who have gone before—repentance literally meaning "being in pain again" (Klimek, 1991).

As the client recounts or relives early experiences the therapist may encourage venting and experiencing of the painful affect. What conclusions about self, the world, the future, and the relationship are being drawn during the remembered interchange, and what feelings do those conclusions prompt?

If the pain we uncover is extensive, we deserve help. One of my clients, Andrea, had a difficult time role-playing herself during a reenactment of a childhood memory because she felt uncomfortable when the early feelings of despair and worthlessness intruded. As mentioned previously, we then switched roles so that I played her and she played her punitive, rejecting mother. She had much less difficulty staying with this role, which she had fully internalized. I felt totally rejected, hopeless, and worthless against the
onslaught of disdain and criticism she poured forth in the role of
her mother.

As I acknowledged to her that in playing her role I felt near
tears with painful feelings of helplessness and despair, she was
surprised, having assumed that her own feelings were unwarranted
and inappropriate. As we tried the role-play again she was more
willing to stay with her own role, rather than attempting to deflect
and intellectualize. She began to identify the eternally fallacious
but situationally warranted conclusions she had drawn about her
own powerlessness, ineffectiveness, and unlovableness during such
interchanges as she monitored the thoughts and conclusions
associated with the feelings.

We must re-experience our early emotions so that we can more
fully comprehend the consequences of our parents’ sins. The
purpose of tasting the bitter is not simply to have the experience.
These bitter fruits help us learn the outcomes of evil so that we can
draw valid conclusions about what we value and claim as good.

John spent almost a year working through painful feelings
associated with an abusive, neglectful mother and step-father. He
experienced enormous guilt for his “judgments” of his parents, and
his resentful feelings toward them. Re-experiencing the negative
emotions associated with early scenes of rejection and neglect
helped him realize that the fruits of his parents’ behavior in his life
had been extremely bitter. As John contrasted these painful fruits
with the warm, secure feelings he experienced from his grandfather
and others, he could clearly identify that the attitudes and actions
of his mother and stepfather were evil. This did not mean,
however, that his mother and stepfather were evil people. By
seeing this contrast John could see himself as a free agent who
could choose with confidence between the two courses of action
exemplified by his parents on the one hand and his grandfather on
the other.

As John re-experienced the negative early events, he realized that
he had feelings of hatred for his mother and stepfather, feelings he
immediately condemned. These feelings caused him to feel extreme-
ly guilty and reinforced his self-perception of badness. He assumed
these feelings represented reality. He had trouble articulating his judgments of the actions of his parents, but had little difficulty articulating and supporting their critical judgments of him.

A simple therapeutic technique assisted John in recognizing that he did not need to hate his parents in order to hate and reject their behavior. While role-playing this situation, John reported to me what the critical voice in his own mind was telling him about himself. In turn, I responded to that critical voice with truthful observations about him and about his choices. I based these responses on scriptures and personal observations, agreeing with whatever was truthful in the message of the critical voice and then assertively giving evidence for what I disagreed with. In one interchange, John spoke as the critical voice of his parents in his own mind, and I spoke as if I were John, from the role of his advocate:

John (critical parental voice speaking to John): You are overreacting to this entire situation. We are good people. You are entirely too sensitive to a little normal discipline.

Me (as John’s self-advocate): I am very sensitive about this situation, but that is because it has been very painful for me. What you did was not normal discipline—it was emotional and physical abuse.

John: What right do you have to judge us? This is none of your business.

Me: It is my business because it is affecting my life. I do not have any right to judge you, and I am not judging you. I have an obligation, however, to judge your behavior. That is the purpose of my mortal life—to learn from my own experience good from evil. It is essential that I learn to make judgments about good and evil based on the consequences of behavior in people’s lives. I judge your behavior to be abusive and evil because it has caused me lifelong pain, has caused my siblings undeserved pain, and has led us to come to conclusions about ourselves that have interfered with our growth and spirituality. I judge these abusive behaviors to be bad.
John: You and your siblings just don’t have the internal fortitude to deal with a little discipline. It is not our fault, it is yours.

Me: Children must see the world the way their parents teach them to see it. We do lack internal fortitude. I believe this is because we were not treated with respect, patient tutoring, and kindness. I have evidence for this. When people do treat me with respect and kindness I can feel the difference in its impact on me.

John: How dare you judge us. I am an important man in the church, and the name of your mother’s great grandfather is in the Doctrine and Covenants.

Me: Christ said he could raise up from stones children of Abraham. A person’s name and lineage are not what is important to the Lord. They are not children of Abraham who bear his name, but who do his works (John 8:39). The same is true today.

At this point John interrupted the interchange, tearful as he felt the truthfulness of this scripture. “This is right. This is the Lord’s way. I feel that the Lord has the same judgment of my parents’ evil behavior as I do.” He realized that the Lord agreed with his assessment of their behavior, and did not require him to say that they were right and he was wrong in order to forgive them.

This stage generally takes many months, and even years, of hard work to achieve. When “forgiveness” is achieved around painful issues without a lengthy period of labor, the result is usually an abortion rather than a rebirth. Patient submission to the labor pain is necessary. Like labor, the pains of rebirth are not constant but intermittent, and they are often worst when the process nears completion. Unlike labor, the pains of rebirth can be cut short by unwillingness to endure them, with the individual rushing to an intellectual forgiveness of the parents that lacks integrity. Alternatively, the individual may retreat to the dull pain of past patterns, running from the intensity rather than working through it. When the process of working through old feelings is successful, the outcome is the death of the “natural man” who is fused with the sins of the parents and the birth of a new creature in the truth and integrity of Christ’s divine parentage and eternal perspective of us.
Regret

Regret is an important element in the repentance process, whether for our own sins or inherited sins. When working through the pain of ancestral sin, we must deal with our grief, or regret, for all we have lost as a result of that sin. We must see clearly the ways the sin has contributed to our failures, robbed us of opportunities, or skewed our vision of reality. These losses are real, and grieving for them is an important step for many people. Often this grief is keenest when we begin to see more clearly our influence on our own children.

Ellen struggled for years to improve her tense relationship with her overly critical father. While she had come to understand many aspects of this relationship, and had no difficulty being aware of the negative impact of his criticism on her life, a dramatic experience of grief over the price she had paid for his criticism helped her take the relationship in a different direction.

Ellen’s boss was usually a reasonably caring individual, but he was something of a perfectionist and frequently pointed out minor errors or shortcomings in her work that made Ellen feel very defensive. She recognized at one level that she was probably overreacting to this criticism, but this was not enough to defuse the alternating anger at him and devaluation of herself she experienced whenever she perceived unanticipated criticism. On one occasion when she was particularly vulnerable from other stress she began crying when her boss offered his suggestions to a report. Ellen was humiliated by her tears, even though her boss was quite supportive.

Ellen returned to her empty house, racked with frustration over her own excessive sensitivity to criticism, which she blamed on her father’s excessive disapproval. Having worked on this issue some in therapy, she gave full vent to her feelings, sobbing and screaming at her absent parent for the crippling effect he had had on her self-esteem. She grieved for the opportunities she had let slip away, panicked by the risk of failure. She grieved for the humiliated child inside who cried over a trivial correction. She grieved over the many times her fear of criticism had caused her to be critical of her own children out of fear of what others might think of her
if they were imperfect. Feeling deeply her grief and expressing it fully (instead of becoming depressed and guilty) were relatively new experiences that helped Ellen accept her losses and let go of her resentment.

Although she never shared her experience with her father, it marked a turning point in their relationship. Having fully heard her own voice and felt her own grief, she became newly able to hear her father's unspoken self-criticism and underlying love. She could see things in the complex family relationship that she could not have seen before. The bitterness left. Over time Ellen acquired an appropriate assertiveness with her father that both curbed his criticism and buffered her self-esteem from his attacks. She also became more sensitive to the pain her children were experiencing at her hand, and became somewhat more successful at curbing her tendency to criticize them.

**Managing Judgment**

Although Ellen acknowledged that her father's behavior was evil, having an honest and truthful perspective on this entire situation allowed her to separate his agency from her own. She recognized that she was not responsible for her father's bad choices and stopped personalizing them. She also recognized that perhaps her father was not entirely responsible for his behavior either, but that he too could have been victim of the unrighteous choices of others. She was able to judge his choices as evil without judging him. Judgment of him as a person she could gladly leave to the Lord. She felt confidence in the mercy, justice, and judgment of God, confident that no one's eternal life would be permanently altered because of the choices of other people, but only because of their own choices. Having experienced the loving acceptance of God in her own life, she was ready to forgive freely what had been in some ways her worst enemy—a loved member of her own household.

Although it is still difficult sometimes for Ellen to imagine that her father would care much about her perceptions or forgiveness, Ellen is confident that she is at peace with him. She is able to pray for her "enemy" with real intent, and see more clearly other elements of the family dance.
As Ellen continued the process of working through her painful relationships, she was occasionally very judgmental of herself. Repeating the negative parental messages she had received, she berated her lack of accomplishments and obedience. (In fact, Ellen was a faithful, accomplished woman.) A simple question helped Ellen place her own inadequacies in perspective. I asked Ellen what the world would be like if everyone in it were like her. At first she responded only with the inadequacies the world would experience, but with gentle questioning, Ellen began to acknowledge that the world would be free of murder, war, drug abuse, theft, and jails. She began to weep as she acknowledged that the world would in fact be a rather nice place overall. She saw herself from a different perspective. She also could acknowledge for the first time that some of her positive attributes—honesty, discipline, and love of learning—were acquired from her father. This simple question can be very helpful in increasing the integrity of judgments of self and others.

Covenant people

The final challenge for individuals working through intergenerational pain is to stop the cycle of sin from continuing in interactions with others. Having come to our own conclusions about good and evil, and having experienced fully the consequences of both in our life, we are in a position to freely choose our course. This is not always simple, but the compulsive repetition of previous patterns, or the compulsive avoidance of some aspects of previous problems, has less hold.

Bev’s extreme pain over her mother’s adultery and divorce when Bev was an adolescent was close to the surface. The resulting rejection from her mother made her mother’s behavior even easier to reject; however, it was difficult not to reject her mother as well. After Bev experienced the strong pull of temptation from a meeting with an old boyfriend during a stressful period in her own marriage, Bev was more forgiving of her mother’s choices, and more determined to stop the cycles of sin begun (at least) by her adulterous grandmother. Although this increased tolerance helped Bev make peace with her mother, it also made her feel, although
briefly, that the adultery was not so bad. As Bev remained firmly in touch with her own pain as an adolescent, that pain helped her choose and live her values.

Although Bev’s mother is dead, Bev felt it was time to release her from the spirit prisons of her own anger. She determined to complete the process of repentance for her mother, and to facilitate her release from the spirit prison of inability to correct or influence those she had hurt and taught by her negative example. Bev wrote an extended letter to her mother over several weeks, recounting her experiences, her feelings, and her conclusions. As she wrote, she stopped to feel deeply whatever feelings began to emerge. Leaning into these feelings helped her work through them and feel heard—by herself. This therapeutic technique allowed her to be more honestly accepting of her own paradigm. Although Bev is now more responsible for her own behavior, she is also much closer to fulfilling the purpose of her mortal life. She is learning by her own experience the good from the evil. She is taking the risk of choosing her own behavior, becoming an independent agent of her own growth and learning.

“For our own Sins”

The statement that we are punished for our own sins and not for Adam’s transgression is profound. It is also precise. We are, in fact, punished, hurt, and injured by our parents’ sins. However, in the eternal perspective, thanks to the Atonement of Christ “wherein the sins of the parents cannot be answered upon the heads of the children, for they are whole from the foundation of the world” (Moses 6:54), we are not subject to the lasting consequences of others’ choices. We are not punished for these sins.

Likewise, this Article of Faith applies to our children. As parents we can be comforted in the knowledge that our children will not reap eternal consequences for our failures. Trusting in the justice of God, we can be assured that our children, too, will be judged for what they did with what they had to work with. As we teach them repentance and live exemplary lives of emotional integrity and courage, they will be better able to make the most of their mortal probation by learning from their own experience and
cleansing further our common lineage. Although we do not wipe out sin in one generation, our children will have an easier time making peace with us if we are loving, teaching, encouraging of self-government. Guilt experienced from our own parenting failures will not haunt us eternally, thanks to the Atonement of Christ.

Among modern Christian faiths, baptism for the dead is a unique doctrine. The great truths represented in this doctrine bear further testimony of the divine inspiration of the prophet who revealed and emphasized it. Joseph Smith once stated that a "correct idea of [God's] character, perfections, and attributes" is essential to our having faith in God (Lectures on Faith 3:2-5). The principle of baptism for the dead testifies of the consummate justice and mercy of those whose plan for our salvation we strive to follow, and whose good and healing characteristics we strive to emulate.

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References


