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A SUMMER EXCURSION TO THE LDS TWILIGHT ZONE

Dennis E. Nelson, Ph.D.

Across the table, a vocally animated woman in perhaps her early sixties claimed that she and her husband were each better off now that “he can read his newspaper and watch TV as much as he wants. That’s all he really wanted to do anyway—just watch TV and read the paper. He doesn’t have to be bothered by my wanting his attention, and I don’t have to be unhappy and resentful over his lack of attention.”

As over a thousand people flowed out of the Wilkinson Center Ballroom to the adjoining lounge and terrace areas so that the banquet dishes and tables could be cleared away, the social professionals arrived. In a scene reminiscent of an LDS version of *Saturday Night Fever*, hundreds of faces, not seen at events since the previous night’s dance, came into view, often in the same small groups of two and three with whom they had arrived the night before.

With aisles packed and some attendees seated on stairs and peering in doorways, a moderate but clearly inadequate-sized classroom struggled to digest its anxious contents. This presentation about relationships was sure to be a big draw. Down the hall to the left, a rather feminist-oriented lawyer prepared to give her advice to a smaller group of listeners regarding legal dilemmas and discrimination facing single adults.

The three short vignettes above, culled from scores of those experienced personally, I hope will provide some feel for the diversity of feelings, impressions, and thoughts connected with a three-and-one-half-day event held annually each July at sites in and around Provo, Utah. Called the LDS Singles Conference by some, the Utah Single Adult Conference by others, and considered as RELIEF HOPE, a breath of fresh air, or the year’s best chance to meet “the right one” by still others, it appears to be the granddaddy of Church-related single events. Participants, arriving it seemed from all over the USA and Canada,

are sometimes given the appellation of the largest (and some would argue the most misunderstood and ignored) minority among LDS membership.

Sunday morning testimonies meshed verbal flavors of Florida, Kentucky, Canada, Puerto Rico, and Texas with those dozens of rather auditorially indistinguishable towns from the Intermountain and Pacific Coast regions. A diversity not likely to be experienced at any local sacrament meeting, a veritable cornucopia of shapes, sizes, minds, colors, hearts, and backgrounds assembled. Their common denominator—being single and LDS. Near the close of the program one speaker noted that more than five thousand individuals had been involved in at least one of the events connected with the conference.

For some two or three years, I had given at least some thought to attending this event, but each July something seemed to come up to prevent it. One year it was the timing of our family vacation; another year a professional seminar produced a schedule clash. But perhaps underneath all these “reasonable explanations” were recurrent fears about what actually attending would mean. To do so would be to openly acknowledge (to a significant LDS population at least) my singleness. It might be perceived as a sign advertising my loneliness and desire for a companion, and it certainly would rip away my facade as the busy psychologist who was rather aloof and above all that—who had such issues resolved. But finally, when sufficient time had passed, and I had provided myself revolving mental rationales ranging from “a valid professional learning experience” to “God helps those who help themselves,” mixed with a generous sprinkling of old-fashioned curiosity, I ruthlessly scheduled and executed the long-contemplated trip.

As a bon voyage gift, I was summoned only days before leaving by my newly called bishop to receive the call of Single Adult Representative for the ward. Letting him know that he had just removed my last shred of dignity by issuing such a call, I interposed with all sincerity the alternative solution of holding a church court instead. Surely, I thought, such an event could be no less devastating. For seven-and-one-half years since becoming single, I had scrupulously tiptoed around and dodged such callings. I had served as a Gospel Doctrine teacher for several years and as an executive secretary to the stake president—legitimate jobs associated in everyone’s mind with regular people. But with this call there was no way of redefining, relabeling, or otherwise distancing it from the realm of the Church “Twilight Zone.” I would, to be sure, finally be one of “those” people. While I had helped many clients who were single, both in and

out of the Church, and had sincere empathy and caring for their circumstances, this was different. Sensing my state of mind, the bishop kindly offered whatever time I needed to consider the calling before giving a scorable response. But sensing that he honestly was doing as he was moved to do made my task no easier.

The brief trip which followed brought profound experiences I hope never to forget, some of which other therapists might find of value. Not to be confused with a somewhat similar event sponsored by the Brigham Young University Summer Conferences and Programs Department, the Utah Valley Single Adult Conference increasingly stands alone as a remnant of a dozen or more Church-sponsored multi-regional gatherings for Church singles. Name tags at the opening Thursday night events (informal outdoor picnic and talent show) provided a geographic montage of most areas of North America and testified to both the word-of-mouth publicity for the event as well as to the anticipation of it among single members. This sense of isolated people experiencing nonisolation and the rejuvenating effect of that in their lives was perhaps the most consistent and vivid impression connected with the event. Without their saying a word, it was evident that most were relieved, built up, and comforted, to know that there were so many others with similar feelings, disappointments, and struggles, even though their specific circumstances and background variables differed considerably.

A man in his early forties who had apparently lost a small fortune as well as a wife; a native American girl, looking at least a dozen years younger than her admitted mid-thirties who told of raising five young children alone; an executive-looking woman who had recently returned to church activity; a woman of stately carriage whose husband had died only months before; youthful-appearing women who had, after fifteen to twenty-five years of marriage, learned suddenly there was someone else in their husbands' lives; and hundreds of others with stories. But they were together now, not alone—and sharing. At times, many were forgetting by simply playing volleyball in the midafternoon sunshine or enjoying a dance with someone they had never before encountered.

Most of these conference-goers, perhaps more than their married counterparts, need heroes. To have one of the Osmonds (Jay) enthusiastically greet the overflow crowd at Thursday night's talent show and openly identify himself as one of them and to have another member of the same family (Marie) speak to them at the program's closing Sunday evening fireside meant self-affirmation, a sense of validity and worth in spite of personal tragedies. That a significant percentage of the LDS population exudes overdone approval and acceptance toward

anything that affirms their standards and values irrespective of its quality level is true, but the vast majority clearly benefitted, at least temporarily, at a feeling level even from the most mediocre of the talent and classes presented. With such an eager audience, it seems a particular shame that in at least two cases presenters simply failed to appear for classes without notice to anyone.

Conscious conversations and the unintended overhearing of miscellaneous verbal bits and pieces during several activities brought personally and professionally enlightening insights. Many of my fellow attendees are in rather complicated binds caused by the expectations of local Church members and leaders. On one hand, they are often expected to surmount their nonmainstream circumstances and serve, perform, feel, and act like their married associates in the ward or branch. In most of these situations not enough effort is put into understanding the day-to-day effects of these singles' circumstances, physical and otherwise. On the other hand, in contexts where special attention or allowances are made, it is likely that the resultant treatment is carried out in either a condescending manner or in one which implies that "special" means "weak" and a bit "less capable." Regardless of the intelligence, talent, and spirituality possessed by the single person, he or she is one, not two, and has mathematically fewer resources to devote to whatever problem is at hand. Thus, it seems singles feel in a no-win position, which can reinforce feelings of inadequacy and decreased motivation.

Perhaps the most disquieting and saddening impression gained from that long Utah weekend was the not very rare opinion that too many priesthood leaders feel uncomfortable with or simply ignore singles. At the level of individual ward singles representatives, that conclusion seemed based on their having put in monumental efforts to get bishops and stake presidents to overtly support singles activities and lend their influence to correct functioning of the outlined organizational structure by calling people to positions and following up to see that stake level councils and personnel function regularly. The process of educating a constantly changing pool of leaders and attempting to modify the negative personal views of others toward the program had exhausted these singles.

More than once, speakers representing the organizational structure of the conference expressed gratitude that the weekend's events were possible because of the love that a number of brethren at the general Church level had for particular regional and stake ecclesiastical leaders. It is truly gratifying that there are leaders with the compassion, foresight, and commitment to LDS singles, leaders who are willing to

work, lobby, and persuade in order to obtain what is needed; but simultaneously, how sad it is that such extraordinary dedication is required to make possible what is so sorely needed. Some disappointment was expressed among a few attendees that changes in the Church's singles program, rumored for at least two years and announced early this year, were so cosmetic and peripheral in contrast to what had been hoped for.

The focus of their hope evidently centered on new and more creative ways to meet worthy LDS singles on a wider geographic scale. Since singles wards are clearly being deemphasized by changes in Church policy, many of the older or more socially mature singles are quietly living their lives within scattered individual wards and branches. With few attending the stereotyped singles dances, greater and greater numbers of "Church" singles are going outside the Church for their social contacts and, in some regions with greater numbers of single members, arranging their own social parties and groups in a less formal system outside the Church-sponsored organization and programs.

That time-honored institution, the church dance, clearly is perceived as the most popular, yet most maligned, form of social activity and meeting medium. The nightly, sometimes multivenued and musically bifurcated, dances at the conference provided all the ingredients for observing the best and worst of this species of happening. By the third, if not the second, evening, the familiar faces could be noted, perhaps a quarter of the total in attendance, who were virtually never seen at other types of activities. While it could be inferred that significant numbers of these professional socializers might be less actively affiliated with regular LDS organizational events such as Sunday meetings, the value of these dances for them could be easily underestimated. For a significant number, these dances may be their major or only concrete contact with large numbers of LDS people and with a Church atmosphere. I, for one, would hate to see that contact severed. Many I talked with said that at one time in recent memory that step was contemplated by the suggestion that printed dance cards, which would be required for entrance into such events, be issued by bishops.

A felt marker sign at the Saturday night "conventional" (a euphemism for "older") dance underscored one type of potential complication of being liberal in dance admission policies. "Divorces Must Be Final" announced the hand-scrawled sign. Subsequent conversation with the matronly ticket-takers informed me that "you never know what might happen; people might get back together!" A little imagination easily yielded up a scenario of some of the local dramas that had most likely unfolded in the past, as well as a couple of

intriguing notions for movie plots based on what could occur. Other rumors about the controversy over dance admission implied that two since-convicted felons, full-fledged Church members at the time of their dance participation, had prompted the review of admissions.

Of more conventional concern, of course, are those who find dances a lonely, rejecting environment. With the ratio of women to men conservatively estimated at such activities to be from between five and seven to one, unless the males present are both extroverted and fearless, and in some cases kind, there are bound to be many women left consistently on the sidelines. At the several dances I attended personally, however, it was not only women who stayed on the circumference of the crowd. A considerable number of men, including one known most intimately to me, were simply either too afraid of rejection, or perhaps too picky, to venture forth. For them, attending a dance is serious business indeed, and implementing a choice of dance partner beyond the realm of mental fantasy is tantamount to an eternal commitment combined with going over Niagara Falls in a barrel. One speaker, on Saturday morning, strongly chastised his male listeners for such behavior and urged the priesthood brethren to give to all the ladies what he viewed as nearly a constitutional right to a good time socially, which involved having a dance partner from time to time and not social isolation. And there were a few gentlemen who seemed to perceive their role in just that manner. They were a delight to view and admirable indeed. The more socially self-conscious would have cautioned them to avoid the risk of making a spectacle of themselves or given advice about the proper age-range limits for selecting a partner. Fortunately, they did not receive all that good and wise counsel, and they were able to both have a good time themselves and provide some of the same for their female counterparts.

Sunday morning's testimony meeting, divided into at least four locations following the sacrament portion, evoked both emotions of empathy and humility. What seemed a cross section of those present told of their circumstances and their spiritual reactions to varied experiences connected with the conference. The meeting proved to be remarkably free from self-aggrandizing and ego-flexing testimonies, except in one instance. The thanksgiving for the weekend was heartfelt indeed. A number of men, exceeding my expectation level, were involved in testimony bearing. Perhaps it is the predominance of female voices or the usually quiet circumstances of singles meetings, but there is virtually always a unique spirit that affects me as I listen to such congregations sing. Never mind that many different levels of spiritual maturation were represented in the words spoken; each speaker

underwent a change—temporary or permanent, shallow or deep, but invariably for the better.

Many thousands who were not there will of course also benefit. Mothers will return with renewed energy to deal with the daily demands of single parenthood. The faith of many whom the attendees date in the coming weeks might be uplifted, just a notch. The conference's events and effects will be shared with friends, some of whom will commit themselves to attend next year, or resolve to continue an attempt to live a particular gospel principle. And local priesthood leaders may notice some change in an individual or two, a change which could result in that leader's becoming a more active and understanding supporter of official organizational efforts to serve the LDS singles population.

How are the results of that short hiatus to Provo to be summarized? Certainly it brought knowledge! The fact that more than half of those entering the temples during 1986 for their own endowments will come from other than traditional nuclear families (only 20% of the entire worldwide LDS membership lives in such a traditional context) is stark testimony to change—a new reality with staggering implications. The trip brought spiritual experiences, including a visit to a singles session at the Provo Temple, albeit pitifully underattended, and the sharing of so many sweet testimonies. Socially, it provided a breath of fresh air, some new friendships, and the reality of a male fantasy: to view en masse thousands of eligible LDS women. From an emotional perspective, it resulted in more empathy and understanding toward single clients and their situations, as well as a therapeutic idea or two. But the most concrete and perhaps most fundamental effects were more personal and idiosyncratic than all of the above. There are more people whom I love and respect than when I left to attend. And my ward has a new Single Adult Representative.

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