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The theme for this address is taken from Alma 37:6 “…by small and simple things are great things brought to pass…”

The verse following adds this: “…and by very small means the Lord doth confound the wise and bringeth about the salvation of many souls.”

Bringing about the salvation of our Father’s children is the purpose of this life.

Obedience is an essential ingredient in obtaining salvation. The Lord explained to Abraham, “And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (Abraham 3:25).

In the grand councils of heaven, Satan proposed an alternate plan for this world, as explained in the book of Moses: “…he [Satan] came before me, saying—Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor” (Moses 4:1).

The idea of saving everyone as Satan proposed may seem attractive, but ponder President Kimball’s description of life under Satan’s plan:

Had the rebels won that great war you and I would have been in a totally different position. Ours would have been a life under force. You could make no decisions. You would have to comply. Every determination would be made for you regardless of your will. Under compulsion you would do the bidding of your dictator leader in whose image the Krushchevs, Hitlers, Napoleons, and Alexanders were but poor and ineffectual novices in comparison. Your life would be cut out for you and you would fit into the mold made for you, (Spencer W. Kimball, The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, edited by Edward L. Kimball, p. 33).

Agency is absolutely central to our ability to learn and to make correct choices, making it possible to return
to our Heavenly Father. Satan’s alternative would never have worked.

To Adam and Eve the Lord emphasized the agency of their children and commanded them to teach them in these words: “And it is given unto them to know good from evil; wherefore they are agents unto themselves, ... wherefore teach it unto your children, that all men, everywhere, must repent, or they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God . . .” (Moses 6:56–57).

It is clear from the Old Testament that many of Adam and Eve’s posterity failed to follow their righteous example.

After King Benjamin’s powerful final discourse to his people recorded in the Book of Mormon, the response of his people was dramatic.

And they all cried with one voice, saying: Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us; and also, we know of their surety and truth, because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually (Mosiah 5:2).

They further stated: “And we are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command us, all the remainder of our days . . .” (Mosiah 5:5).

King Benjamin had taught them to teach their children in these words: [neither] will ye suffer that they transgress the laws of God, . . . but ye will teach them to walk in the ways of truth and soberness; ye will teach them to love one another, and to serve one another” (Mosiah 4: 14–15).

It is somewhat sad to read the following a few chapters later:

Now it came to pass that there were many of the rising generation that could not understand the words of king Benjamin, being little children at the time he spake unto his people, and they did not believe the tradition of their fathers. They did not believe what had been said concerning the resurrection of the dead, neither did they believe concerning the coming of Christ. And now because of their unbelief they could not understand the word of God; and their hearts were hardened. And they would not be baptized; neither would they join the church (Mosiah 26:1–4).

Clearly in some of the Nephite families the faith of the parents had not been successfully transferred on to their children.

Contrast this with the faith of the sons of Helaman, the children of Lamanite converts. Their courage was extraordinary in the face of going into battle as recorded in Alma:

Now they never had fought, yet they did not fear death; . . . yea, they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them. And they rehearsed unto me the words of their mothers, saying: We do not doubt our mothers knew it (Alma 56:47–48).
These faithful mothers had been very effective transferring their faith to these sons.

In our day the Lord emphasizes parental responsibility in these words:

And again, inasmuch as parents have children in Zion, or in any of her stakes which are organized, that teach them not to understand the doctrine of repentance, faith in Christ the Son of the living God, and of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of the hands, when eight years old, the sin be upon the heads of the parents (D&C 68:25).

Notice the admonition is to teach, not to compel. Any experienced parent understands there is no exact recipe that guarantees every child will always do as the parent wishes. But in our desire to be certain that our children make no major errors, we can be tempted to use methods which violate the principle of agency. There is a fine line between effective parenting and unrighteous coercion. When that line is crossed, the child may stubbornly rebel to demonstrate that he still has his agency.

As children grow up, it is essential they learn the gospel and, more importantly, internalize the gospel so that they have their own testimony and their own feelings of love and trust in the Lord who cares about His children and hears and answer prayers. The challenge is to give children increasing latitude as they mature and demonstrate they are trustworthy so that they are prepared to be responsible adults.

A practical example of the challenges faced by parents of small children trying to teach the principle of the fast was recently shared with us by one of our daughters. I quote:

Gavin... has struggled a bit with this principle as he is slight of build and gets very hungry. He is 9 years old. I have encouraged but not forced him to fast.... He gets a lot of peer pressure from Clarissa (two years older) who thinks he should be able to fast without making a fuss, as she started fasting when she was much younger than he is. I always explain to Gavin that he can choose how long to fast, as I don't want this to be a negative experience for him. I encourage him to pray about how long he should fast, and to do what he feels he should do, with the Lord's help. In the past few months

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THE CHALLENGE IS TO GIVE CHILDREN INCREASING LATITUDE AS THEY MATURE AND DEMONSTRATE THEY ARE TRUSTWORTHY SO THAT THEY ARE PREPARED TO BE RESPONSIBLE ADULTS.
he has chosen to do a full fast with us, but it has been hard on him physically, and often he eats something a bit earlier than we do. On Saturday evening when the kids had all gone to bed fasting, I got the message... [we] were having a family fast for (a member of our extended family). ... That night I pleaded with the Lord to bless Gavin that he would have a positive experience fasting, as I wanted his testimony of fasting to grow. When the kids awoke on Sunday morning, I explained to them about our (special) family fast... and thanked them for being part of it.

... When we had all been fasting nearly 24 hours, Gavin came downstairs to the kitchen with a happy skip and said, “Mom, I don’t know why, but this time fasting has been so much easier for me. I haven’t been that hungry or anything.”

The fast would go a little over 24 hours because of late arrival of guests, but when his mother offered to allow him to eat something, he refused, saying: “That’s OK, mommy, I want to wait until we say the prayer. I can wait.” The Lord had answered my prayers to help Gavin have an easier time fasting.

--E-mail from Kathleen Oaks McLaren, March 6, 2006

There is no amount of force that could have effectively written the principle of the fast into the heart of this child, but by being empowered to make choices for himself with some direction from his mother, he is on his way towards a testimony of fasting.

This is an example of the small and simple things done regularly in the homes of parents who are teaching their children using methods which are generally effective and consistent with the gospel of love.

Will children always do everything correctly if taught properly by their parents? That would be quite unusual!

I had a mother who was widowed when I was four, my older brother nearly eight, and our younger sister age one. Mother was a very good teacher and a very loving mother, but it was challenging to raise her children alone. Her techniques might be considered small and simple, but they were powerful. She trusted us, and praised us for everything good that we did. It was difficult to disappoint a mother who had so much confidence in us.

Did we grow up as children who always did what we should? NO! I remember vividly an episode when my brother and I were in our teen years and beginning to question and exert a little more independence. We decided we wanted to do a certain activity on Sunday which was not within the standards that our mother had taught us. Mother told us not to do it and the more she resisted, the more we insisted. Finally, seeing that she could not dissuade us, she said, “Then go, but not with my blessing.”

We went on our activity with a feeling of exhilaration at our independence and then had an absolutely miserable time. Our mother’s teachings were deeply in our hearts and the Spirit made it abundantly clear to both of us that “wickedness never was happiness,” although wickedness is probably too strong a term for our one-time transgression. Neither of us has been seriously tempted to break the Sabbath since that experience.

President Gordon B. Hinckley’s biography by Sheri Dew is a rich source of the small and simple things involved in the teaching by his parents which were important to him as he was growing up to be the strong, righteous person we all love and respect as our prophet:
Though Bryant [his father Bryant S. Hinckley] sermonized from the pulpit, there was very little preaching around the house. But he was a storyteller and an avid reader of biography and history, and he had a knack for extracting inspiring examples from the lives of those he studied and referring to them when occasion warranted. (Sheri L. Dew, Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley, p. 43.)

In 1915 President Joseph F. Smith recommended families hold home evening one evening each week. The Hinckleys announced the new program to the family.

This pronouncement was greeted with moans from children who weren't anxious to be corralled into another meeting, but from that time forward Monday evenings were reserved for family. Bryant or Ada would give a lesson and then urge their children to perform—something that elicited smirks, guffaws, and sometimes out-and-out laughter.

President Hinckley commented: "It took us a long time to reach the point where we could sing together without giggling. It must have been disgusting to my parents the way we giggled."

But Bryant and Ada persisted. The family had regular family prayer and often listened to faith-promoting incidents from Bryant's seemingly endless reservoir of stories. Though some family home evenings were less tolerable than others, the net effect was positive. Those simple gatherings created strong bonds between parents and children, brothers and sisters—a critical element in the unification of their . . . family. (Dew, p. 34.)

In my view the family home evening program is a wonderful gift that Church leaders have given the parents of the Church. It is encouragement to do a more effective job of teaching our children and to formalize a time to do it. Recommending a day for this to generally occur makes it is easier for parents to defend the time for the family if they will just take advantage of it. It may be a small and simple thing to take the time weekly to teach our children, but the rewards are great.

I will share our own experience with home evening.

In the early '80s the Church reemphasized each family saving Monday nights for family home evening. In our family we had talked over gospel principles at our meals and usually did something on Sunday together which could count as family home evening, but when the leaders of the Church again asked us to consistently hold family home evening, we determined to follow the program of the Church and reserve Monday nights. I had a problem. I am an ophthalmologist (eye surgeon). Our Utah Ophthalmology Society had their monthly dinner meeting on a Monday night in Salt Lake. This was an important professional meeting for me.

Several of us asked the officers of the society to move the meeting from Monday evening, but they refused. We knew that the Church could not preempt this professional meeting, so those of us who were determined to follow the counsel of the prophet simply stopped coming to the meeting. We did not make it a Church issue. We just told them that we had a conflict that made it impossible to attend. Within a short time the meeting was changed to Wednesday and the attendance increased.

As parents we moved aside any conflicts in our own schedules. We also told our children of events scheduled Monday evening which we had refused to attend, so they knew we were placing family home evening as our top priority. As our children
entered the teen years when so many scheduling conflicts arise, it was rare for any of them to request absence from home evening. Recently I asked our second daughter, who had been a very active and involved teen in high school, why it had been so rare for any of them to request missing home evening. Her reply, “You and mom always put aside other things on Monday nights and we knew we could not ask to be absent.” That approach seemed a small and simple thing at the time, but today we see the rewards as each of our married children is holding family home evening in their own families. It is a measure of reassurance to us relative to the teaching of our grandchildren.

The small and simple things which make a successful family, of course, begin with the relationship of the parents.

It seemed a small and simple thing to fall in love and marry my wife on returning from my mission, but after 47 years of marriage and many small and a few large decisions, we find ourselves parents of nine children and grandparents to 36 grandchildren. All that is dear to us came step by step in seemingly small and simple ways as we moved forward with our lives.

Some, confronted by the seriousness of decisions, may sit paralyzed waiting for the Lord to tell them what to do. I had a very enlightening experience relating to this principle while serving as a young and very new bishop of a student ward on the BYU campus in the early ’70s.

A young woman came to me for counsel. A fellow had proposed marriage to her. She really liked this young man but was strongly committed to not taking a step as important as marriage without receiving spiritual direction that it was right. She had been praying about whether to marry him and had received no answer. I assured her the Lord would surely answer her prayers and to keep on praying. I saw her each week for several weeks as we both became more and more frustrated that she was receiving no recognizable answer to her diligent prayers.

Finally she came again for counsel and was quite distraught. The young man was really pressing her for an answer. He loved her, but felt that she was stalling because she probably did not love him. He was approaching the time he might terminate the relationship. She felt she could not marry him without an answer from the Lord. I was very troubled by this. I knew the Lord answers prayers. I knew that this young woman and young man were worthy. I knew that this was a very important decision. Why was she not receiving an answer?

Understanding came to me in a moment of clear
enlightenment. I told her that she was expecting the Lord to completely make the decisions for her and He would not do that. Even a decision as important as marriage requires a person to exercise their own agency. We read together D&C 9:7-9 where Oliver Cowdery is told why he was not able to translate the Book of Mormon.

“Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings…”

Like Oliver Cowdery, she had taken no thought except to keep asking the Lord. I told her that she must exercise her own agency. She must study it out in her own mind, make a tentative decision, and then ask the Lord for a confirmation of her own decision.

To facilitate her decision making, I asked her to make two lists. On one list she was to place all the positives about marrying him and the things that she liked about him. On the second list she was to outline all her doubts, anything that was a negative as she thought of marrying him. After a few days she was to evaluate the list, make a tentative decision on her own, and then go to the Lord in prayer to ask for a confirmation of her own decision.

The following Sunday she came to ask for a temple recommend to be married. I asked her if she were now sure. She felt certain that it was right to marry him. She had made the lists and had looked at them every day. Each day she was crossing things off the list of negatives and adding to the list of positives. Her words were something like, “I just began to feel good about getting married, and I knew that my prayers were being answered.”

It was clear that until this young woman was moving forward on her own to use her own agency, the Lord would not enter in and tell her that she should marry. Over many years I have been able to observe the happiness of this couple and their lovely family. It was right all along for her to marry this boy, but she needed to exercise her own agency and not expect the Lord to impose the decision on her.

In marriage the issues of agency are always present. If we fail to respect the agency of our spouse, problems will surely arise.

I have a friend who was a stake president at BYU in the late ’70s. I served as his counselor. In a teaching situation he shared a difficult event in his own marriage. As a recently returned missionary newly married, he wanted to be sure that he and his wife did everything right. He virtually commanded her that they would go to church. His wife is cute and saucy and independent. She refused to go to church. That happened for several weeks, with him redoubling his efforts to force her to go and she becoming more stubborn in her refusal to be commanded. Finally in great concern he went to his bishop. He was given the advice to stop commanding her to come and simply say he was going to church and invite her to join him. It was but a short time that a wiser husband regularly had the company of a much happier wife at church. They also had a better idea of the proper way to relate to each other.

A sometimes destructive behavior for a wife is to be constantly reminding her husband of everything that he must do to be righteous. It can be carried to the point that all of the joy and initiative for him are removed. Of course, reasonable reminders and loving encouragement are something every man
needs. Problems arise when a good thing is carried to an extreme.

I lived most summers of my youth on my grandfather’s farm south of Payson, Utah. Grandfather Harris told me on several occasions a child’s fable that has application in how we relate to others and respect their agency.

The sun and the wind were observing a man walking below them on a cool fall day. The wind, being very proud of his power, bet the sun that he could get the man’s coat off of him more effectively than the sun could. The sun agreed to the contest. The wind had his turn first and began to blow. The man buttoned his coat. The wind redoubled his efforts and blew so hard that he nearly tore the coat from the man’s back. The man managed to hang on to his coat by using both hands to clutch it around him tightly.

Finally the sun had his turn. As the wind ceased, the sun shone brightly on the man. As the warm rays were absorbed by the coat, he unbuttoned it. As more of the sun’s warmth penetrated the coat, he removed it.

Grandfather pointed out to me that we sometimes try to influence people by acting like the wind and trying to blow down their resistance and force them into the action we wish them to take, rather than having them feel our warmth and taking action on their own. Some try to influence their spouse or children by acting like the wind instead of having their family members feel their warmth and love.

The interactions of spouses seem small and perhaps simple, but their pattern produces effects which are great either in their positive or negative way.

A number of years ago I had a teacher at church whom I idealized. His knowledge was very great. He had a tremendous way of teaching the gospel. The subject matter was clearly organized in his mind. I thought he represented everything good in the Church. As I associated with him more, however, I noticed that he had a grave problem. He could allow his wife no space, no opinion, no ability to talk or be involved. He squelched her every time she made any comment. He always had to be the center of attention and he always had to be right. As an isolated
event it may have seemed small and harmless, but as a pattern it was very destructive. The forceful characteristics which seemed so wonderful in the setting of his teaching destroyed their marriage. He did not give to her the small and simple actions of respect and nurturing which would have solidified their marriage.

One of the most important gifts we can give our children is the simple knowledge and security that their parents love each other.

An experience with my oldest daughter when she was about eight helped me to properly place relationships within our immediate family. This daughter observed me give my wife a very tender kiss as I came home from work. She grabbed me around the legs and said, “Daddy, you love mommy more than you do us kids, don’t you?” I momentarily did not know what to say, but I have always been grateful that she asked the question so directly so that I could ponder briefly and give her the correct answer. “Yes, Kathleen, I do. You children will grow up, marry, and leave our home, but your mother and I will be together forever and our relationship is different.” I further reassured her how much her parents loved her.

As children grow and learn to responsibly use their agency, parents must give them greater latitude in making their own decisions. Even as parents respect the agency of their children, they need to be vigilant and deal with problems which sometimes develop. Years ago I had an acquaintance who was told that his children had done something quite seriously wrong. His response, “My children do not do things like that.” He would not even consider the possibility that his children could do anything wrong, so no corrective action was taken.

In contrast, another friend recently shared a situation in his family. They moved to Utah with three teenage daughters. In many ways they represent the ideal active LDS family. Their children were developing friendships in school and adjusting to their move. One day they received a shocking telephone call from a family member. Did they know that their teenage daughter had a Web page on myspace.com? This is a Web site which has caused significant alarm to concerned parents both in Utah and nationally. Apparently, young people post their pictures, personal information, telephone
numbers, addresses, etc., on this site and then begin conversations online with others who are usually strangers. Sometimes designing adults visit this site to make contact with unsuspecting young people.

These parents were shocked. They went to the Web page and were troubled by the personal information their daughter had placed on the site. They noted that young people are apparently more willing to share things on the Web than they would in speaking personally to someone. They were very upset and unhappy with this development in their previously obedient daughter who had been introduced to the site through friends at school. Something had to be done.

They first prayed as parents for wisdom. Their actions were not done in anger or in haste. They told the daughter and her older sister (who was not involved) that they needed to talk with them about computer use, but gave them a few minutes before that meeting to ponder what the parents might have in mind. The older sister was asked to be present as a support to the offender so that she did not feel isolated and alone as her parents were discussing the problem with her. I cannot duplicate the meeting because I was not there, but the daughter received curtailment of her computer privileges as well as careful parental correction in a way that preserved her dignity.

As I pondered this episode I also realized that the parents had in these small and simple ways been able to correct their daughter without destroying their relationship or propelling her in a direction they did not want. They also preserved her own self-concept as a good person who had made an error. She was not accused of being bad a person. The parents expressed love and confidence in her ability to make the changes she needed to. She closed her Web site, changed friends, and is moving in the direction which will bring both her and her family happiness. It was a series of small, simple, and loving steps which brought about the desired changes.

As we attend such functions as this, we are seeking for helps in wrestling with the problems our children and grandchildren face today. We will learn many excellent and helpful things from those who have developed expertise by formal training or by their own personal experience. The practical application to our own families must come through counseling together as parents, pondering, and praying. No two families are identical, but there is much knowledge which is useful. In the end we are working to touch hearts to bring about a desire to do that which is right. Force is of limited value and reserved for unusual situations in relatively small children. Agency is a fundamental ground rule of this life.

I will conclude by quoting from the Lord’s directions concerning influencing others: Section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile—Reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reproved, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy (41-43).

May the Lord bless us in the application of these eternal principles to our own families.

Merrill C. Oaks, M.D., is a former member of the Quorum of Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He delivered this address at the Family Expo Conference held at Brigham Young University April 3-4, 2006.
MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE FAMILY

by Elder Alexander B. Morrison

FROM THE BED OF PAIN, FROM THE PILLOW WET WITH TEARS, WE ARE LIFTED HEAVENWARD BY THAT DIVINE ASSURANCE AND PRECIOUS PROMISE "I WILL NOT FAIL THEE, NOR FORSAKE THEE" [JOSHUA 1:5].

— President Thomas S. Monson

This article is taken from Helping and Healing Our Families, published by the BYU School of Family Life and Deseret Book.
Among the most painful and often protracted ordeals an individual or family can face is that of mental illness. One of the central characteristics of the cruel constellation of diseases grouped under the general rubric of mental illness is the suffering involved. Its intensity scarcely can even be described. Day follows dreary day in a long procession of gray emptiness, punctuated by flashes of acute torment.

The suffering not only colors every attempt to treat and hopefully to heal the victims of these devastating disorders, but extends outward to engulf others. Family members, caught up in the tsunami of suffering, the maelstrom of pain and despair, echo the anguish of the primary victims. Each longs for a day when solace will be provided, tears dried, hope rekindled, and torment ceased. And yet there is hope. Many mentally ill people find their suffering greatly reduced with proper treatment. Further, sufferers from mental illness commonly have times when they function normally, interspersed with bouts of illness. A case in point would be major depression, which typically involves episodes of severe, even debilitating depressive symptoms, usually over a period of several months, followed by remissions which may last for months or even years. Whatever the course of their illness, all involved can be assured that nothing should “be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

In this brief article, it is not possible to discuss all categories of mental illness. Some of the most important disorders include anxiety disorders (panic disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder and assorted phobias); mood disorders (depression and bipolar disorder); schizophrenia; and eating disorders (anorexia nervosa and bulimia, two disorders seen primarily, though not exclusively, in young women). The term “mental illness” does not describe the temporary social and emotional concerns associated with the normal wear and tear of life. Many people feel anxious when they start a new job, for example, and most of us are sad following the death of a friend. Those who act in those ways are not mentally ill. Their actions are normal. Nor should we include in the category of mental illness the secondary effects of physical disorders such as meningitis, high fevers, or brain tumors. Mental illness is something different. It lies at one end of a continuum linking the social and emotional concerns which are the transient accompaniments of daily living, and mental diseases, many of which have their roots in human biology. Mental illness may be defined as a brain disorder that causes mild to severe disturbances in a person’s understanding, thinking, and behavior. If such disturbances are sufficiently severe, and last long enough, they may seriously interfere with the victim’s ability to function normally as an individual or productive member of society. The ability to cope with life’s ordinary stresses and strains may significantly be impaired. Under severe circumstances, mental illnesses may threaten life. Significant numbers of patients with anorexia nervosa, for example, literally starve to death in the midst of plenty, and approximately one of seven persons with severe depression dies by his or her own hand.

A brief description of major categories of mental illness may help outline the devastating effects of these disorders. About one in four Americans will suffer from an anxiety disorder in his or her lifetime. Anxiety disorders may severely limit the ability of the sufferer to function effectively or get any enjoyment out of life. Up to one-third of anxiety sufferers essentially are disabled and unable to function effectively. Sufferers have increased likelihood of turning to alcohol or other mood-modifying drugs in vain attempts
to deaden the physiologic and psychic pain they feel.¹

It is estimated that more than 17 million Americans are severely depressed each year, and nearly two-thirds do not get the help they need. An estimated 2 percent of pre-adolescent children, aged 7–12, exhibit major depression. Severe depression is a malignant sadness, all-consuming, seemingly never-ending, not amenable to cheering up by an act of will or the actions of others. It may also be life threatening. A high percentage of people who kill themselves are depressed, and anyone who is seriously depressed must be considered at risk for suicide.⁶

Schizophrenia causes bizarre and frightening symptoms in its victims, including hallucinations, most often involving the hearing of voices. Usually the voices are condemnatory and critical of the victim. Delusions—false, fixed, often paranoid ideas with no basis in reality—are common. Disorders of thought and behavior such that the patient speaks gibberish, or (for example) wears layers of heavy winter clothes on a hot summer’s day, complete the triumvirate of psychotic symptoms seen in schizophrenics. Social withdrawal, decreased intellectual abilities, apathy, and staring into space also are common.⁷

Victims of anorexia nervosa are most often young women. They are chronically unable to sustain minimally normal body weight; suffer intense, constant fear of becoming obese; and have distorted perceptions of their body weights or shapes. They become progressively more emaciated, fatigued, and depressed. Unless treated quickly they die from starvation or heart failure.³ Although no one knows with certainty what causes anorexia, many believe it represents an attempt, either conscious or unconscious, to control at least one part of life—body weight.⁹

Persons with bulimia are characterized by binge eating, followed by purging. Excessive physical exercising, in an attempt to balance out the episodic binge eating, is common. Like the anorexic, bulimics see their bodies through a distorted perspective. They commonly suffer from intense self-hatred, guilt, depression, or anxiety. They also may die from heart failure and often have serious dental problems.¹⁰ (Marlene S. Williams, “Helping those with eating disorders,” Marriage and Families, Winter 2006, pp. 11-15 discusses ways to help a family member who suffers from an eating disorder.)

Some of the heaviest burdens borne by sufferers from mental illness and their families are the prejudice, ignorance, misunderstanding and social stigma which characterize the attitudes of many in society towards the mentally ill. Many victims and their families fear, for good reason, that they will be ridiculed, whispered about, even shunned if they seek help. They believe that their spouses, friends, children, or employers may abandon them and there will be no opportunities for marriage. Reports of treatment or hospitalization for mental disorders may result in decreased career opportunities. Some insurance companies limit their coverage of patients with mental illness, perhaps even refusing coverage.¹¹

Misunderstanding and fear continue to surround mental illness. Silence, alienation and prejudice concerning mental illness abound. Mental illness still is hidden, whispered about behind closed doors, denied, considered shameful. In this supposedly enlightened age, so many maintain irrational fears, and wrong and hurtful ideas about mental illness. Many fail to see it for what it is, the mental analogue of physical disorders.

**Overcoming Misconceptions**

Myths and misconceptions about mental illness abound in our society. I wish I could say that Latter-day Saints are more enlightened than the general
public on such matters, but many are not. Space permits only a brief description of three of the most prevalent of the myths with which sufferers from mental illness, and their families, must deal daily.

**Myth 1: Mental Illness Is Caused by Sin**

There is no doubt that sin—the deliberate breaking of God’s commandments—causes much behavior that is hurtful both to the individual concerned and to others. Perhaps nowhere in holy writ is the power of sin to torment and harrow up the soul more vividly exemplified than in the words of the repentant Alma: “But I was racked with eternal torment, for my soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree and racked with all my sins. . . . Oh, thought I, that I could be banished and become extinct both soul and body” (Alma 36:12, 15).

Sorrow and remorse during the repentance process—even feelings so galling and painful as those felt by Alma—are necessary prerequisites for true repentance. They are not, however, manifestations of mental illness. Those attempting to work through the pain, remorse, and depression associated with sin towards the goal of repentance will benefit greatly from confession to their bishops, followed by counseling from them. In this role, no mental health professional, regardless of his or her skills and training, can ever take the place of the faithful bishop, who receives spiritual gifts of discernment and wisdom as part of his calling. Guided by the Holy Ghost, the bishop can provide invaluable assistance to those suffering from sin and desirous of repentance.

That said, however, in many instances, aberrant, even bizarre thoughts, feelings, and actions result from mental illness and not from sin. Many faithful Latter-day Saints, who live the commandments and honor their covenants, experience profound personal struggles with mental illness. In common with those who suffer from physical ailments, such individuals are victims of disease, not sin. To assume that persons with mental illness have brought it upon themselves because they are sinners, that God is punishing them for their wickedness, is to my mind contrary to His very nature. I know He is not the source of sin, and I am of the firm view He does not give His children mental illness to punish them. Indeed, if the logic that He does so were carried to its logical conclusion, we would all be mentally ill, because “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

I believe that in His omniscience, God knows a trial
is coming to us and declines to remove it, using it as a tutoring tool to help us to grow spiritually. He knows every detail of our DNA, and hence of our genetic predisposition to resist or acquire disease, including mental illness. He knows fully the myriad of biological, social, and environmental factors to which we will be exposed in our lifetime and understands when genetic predisposition will converge with a stressful event or episode, whether environmental or emotional, to produce disorder, even serious disease.

A primary role of the bishop, then, is to ascertain whether a deeply distressed member of his congregation is suffering the effects of sin or of mental illness. He is able to do so as he is guided by the Holy Ghost, and if he knows the characteristics of mental illness. If the problem is sin, the bishop will know how to assist the member through the repentance process. If the bishop understands the nature and symptoms of mental illness, and discerns that the member’s problems lie in that area, he should refer the individual to a properly qualified mental health professional for treatment.

*Myth 2: All Mentally Ill Persons Need Is a Priesthood Blessing*

I am a great advocate of priesthood blessings. Our beloved daughter, Mary, who has suffered from panic attacks and depression for more than half of her life, literally lives from blessing to blessing. I know from experience that priesthood blessings do inestimable good. I know, too, that Jesus Christ is the Great Physician, the unparalleled healer of both body and mind. He and He alone has access to the healing Balm of Gilead needed by all who suffer. In any and all circumstances, in good times and bad, in sickness and in health, our lives will become more peaceful and richer as we turn to Him. Only then can we find rest unto our souls, as He Himself has said (see Matthew 11:28-30).

That agreed, I suggest that priesthood leaders are ecclesiastical leaders and not mental health professionals. Almost all of them lack the professional skills and training needed to treat persons with mental illness effectively. They are well advised to seek competent professional assistance for those in their charge who are mentally ill and in need of skilled help.

When bishops, family members, or others refer mentally ill persons to mental health professionals, it is important that the individual chosen not only be professionally competent, but also that he or she follows practices and procedures com-
patible with gospel principles. Some mental health professionals are unwilling to work within the structure of a patient’s faith system. A mental health professional need not be a Latter-day Saint to be effective, but should be willing to accept the way gospel principles are crucial to a patient’s life and be respectful of them.

**Myth 3: Someone Is to Blame for Mental Illness**

It is common to blame others, or oneself, for whatever goes wrong in life. Many victims of mental illness work themselves into a frazzle and wear themselves out emotionally in futile, repetitive attempts to recall something they, their parents, siblings, or someone else might have done that resulted in the misery and despair they are forced to endure. Many blame themselves and are unable to rid themselves of the terrible, nagging conclusion that somehow, some way, even though they don’t understand how or why, they are the cause of their own pain. They feel ashamed of themselves for being sick and think they are weak and defective. Parents, spouses, and other family members too often tear themselves apart emotionally trying in vain to determine where they went wrong. They may try to bargain with God, offering Him anything, even their own lives, if He will but cure their beloved family member.

Victims and their families may blame problems of mental health on demonic possession. Such has occurred, in very rare instances, but we should take care not to give the devil credit for everything that goes awry in the world! Generally speaking, mentally ill patients need treatment, love, and support, not exorcism.

Victims laboring under the false belief that they themselves are the cause of their problems because of something they did or didn’t do are commonly wracked with false guilt. They may pray repeatedly for God to forgive them, even though there is no objective evidence they have anything of note to be forgiven of. In the false belief they have been deserted by God, they may become angry and bitter towards Him. They may turn to the false pleasures of the world to “get even” or to dull their pain. Nothing they do of this sort, whether it be blaming themselves, others, or even God, does any good. The reason is simple: in most instances, the thoughts and behaviors of people with mental illness result from disease processes, not the actions of others.

Ascribing blame for mental illness causes unnecessary suffering for victims and others alike. It takes time and energy which would better be used to get a complete and accurate diagnosis of the illness concerned; understand the biological processes involved, which often ultimately involve changes in the functioning of and communication between the cells of the brain; get proper medication to help reverse those changes; and learn cognitive and behavioral techniques that are crucial parts of the healing process. Family members and friends can best spend their time not in playing the “blame game,” but in seeking understanding and enhanced compassion, empathy, forgiveness, and patience.

**Where Can We Turn for Help?**

The community of professional caregivers in the mental health field, generally speaking, is divided between psychiatrists and psychotherapists—i.e., psychologists, social workers, and other licensed mental health professionals. Both groups provide invaluable assistance to sufferers from mental diseases.

Psychiatrists are physicians with specialized training in psychiatry and neurology. They also are trained to provide psychotherapy. Psychiatrists can prescribe medication, which psychologists cannot, and because
they are trained medical doctors, can determine if a patient is suffering from some other medical problem, such as brain cancer, which could cause symptoms of mental illness.

Psychologists are trained, often at the doctoral level, to provide cognitive and behavioral therapy to help patients with mental illness understand why they think and act as they do, and to assist them in developing behaviors which will aid in their healing. Many are excellent psychotherapists, as are other trained mental health professionals, such as clinical social workers.

Controversy about medication versus psychotherapy swirls and eddies through the community of mental health professionals. In my view, both have invaluable contributions to make. How the two sets of disciplines are used, and in what mix, will depend on the orientation and training of the practitioner involved and on the needs of a particular patient. My belief, supported by emerging research, is that eventually we will find that medication and psychotherapy act in a common way, by altering brain chemistry and function, especially with respect to anxiety and mood disorders.

Much information on mental illness of value to the general public is available free from the National Institute of Mental Health (www.nimh.nih.gov). Information is available on a broad variety of topics, including anxiety disorders, depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and eating disorders.

Readers will find much of value at www.ldsmentalhealth.org. This website is not sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but it provides a great wealth of reliable, gospel-compatible information on a broad variety of mental illnesses. It is not intended to replace the spiritual direction of ecclesiastical leaders and does not provide information on medication or counseling of mentally ill persons.

LDS Family Services is a corporation which serves Church members and others by providing information on a broad variety of family-related problems. Mental health concerns are dealt with through service and advice, consistent with gospel principles. Individuals usually are referred to Family Services by their bishops.

Show forth additional love and compassion
If family members ridicule, demean, criticize, or abandon the victim involved; if they go on and on about supposed (and usually false) sin and blame; if they are judgmental and censorious, I guarantee the patient will not do well. But if they love and enfold, if they refuse to judge, if they are kind, compassionate, and empathetic, then therapy exerts its full beneficial effects.

The Role of Family Members
Family members are central to helping and healing those with mental illness. Some of the ways in which they can help include the following:

Get treatment promptly
It does no good, and may do a lot of harm, to delay getting appropriate treatment from a skilled mental health professional

for a family member who, there is good reason to believe, is mentally ill. Psychotherapy given early in the course of a mental disease, before it becomes deep-seated and less easily treated, will yield quicker and better results. Medication administered by a skilled physician may reverse psychotic or other bizarre behavior, assist the brain to begin to heal, and improve the effectiveness of psychotherapy.

Failure to provide needed treatment only increases the possibility that mentally ill persons may harm themselves or others. Those who need advice on where to go for treatment should discuss the matter with a trusted advisor—the bishop, other family members, the family doctor, or a knowledgeable friend.

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Provided patients are not a threat to themselves or others, and do not require intensive nursing care, a loving home may be the best place for healing to occur. There the patient feels safe, secure, and in the presence of those who really care in ways that professional detachment forbids. Psychiatric wards in hospitals remain necessary, but in my admittedly limited experience they are often frightening and foreboding places, which do little to calm and reassure many patients. They may provide little of the intensive treatment needed by seriously ill patients.

A word of caution is necessary. Home may not be the best place for mentally ill patients if there are small children there, who require constant care or may be frightened and influenced by a mentally ill family member. Further, the turmoil and hubbub in many busy homes may be excessively disturbing to some mentally ill persons.

Family members soon learn that developing and unfailingly demonstrating patience is a large part of love and compassion. Patience must be developed if one is to deal effectively with the seemingly endless ebb and flow of illness, the apparently never-ending routine of one step forward and another backward, the constant vigilance required of those who are caregivers for patients who may be in danger of suicide. Patience is needed to guard against the tendency to get out of sorts with the person who is sick, and whose sickness causes eddies of pain in the lives of others. Remember that no one with mental illness wants to be that way. People are not mentally ill because they lack willpower. They cannot, through any exercise of will, get out of the predicament they are in. To lose patience with them, to advise them to “just snap out of it” and “get a little backbone,” is not only insensitive, but futile.

Anyone who has ever witnessed the almost unbearable pain and uncontrollable weeping of a severe panic attack, or the indescribable sadness of a severely depressed person who cries all day and retreats into hopeless apathy, would never think for a moment that mental illness is just a matter of willpower.

At the same time that we must learn to be patient with ourselves and with the victim of mental illness, we also must learn to be patient with God. When prayers are not answered as we had hoped for so fervently, when our timetable is not that of the Almighty, when we are called upon to tread the winepress of affliction alone, it becomes seductively easy to grow angry with God, to feel He has abandoned us. Pain and patience are uneasy partners at best. But it is in learning to endure whatever mortality brings us—including the vicarious suffering

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we experience at the pain of loved ones—that we find the key which opens the door to celestial halls.

Family members must then learn to put their trust in God. No matter if our path be strewn with thorns, no matter how onerous our struggle through mists of darkness and torrents of tears, God will succor and sustain us. Learning that lesson is at best a stern struggle. It involves tutorial suffering and stretching. But it is the only path to peace, amidst the pain and suffering, the loneliness, depression, and despair of mental illness.

Those who suffer from mental illness, who are burdened with pain, depression, and confusion must, I believe, be especially on their guard against the devil and his agents. So too must the circle of loving family members and other caregivers.

*Learn all you can about mental illness and how to deal with it*

Family members of mentally ill persons will love better as they learn more about the causes of mental illness and the suffering it brings. Their compassion for the victim will increase, and they will be less judgmental and censorious. They will grow more patient and forbearing. They will begin to see mental illness for what it is—a disease of the brain, not of the spirit, a malady caused not by sin, but by problems in the working of the most complex structure in the body. They will grow thankful for medical and other therapeutic interventions which have revolutionized treatment of mental illness in the last four decades, and will look forward with hope to the rapidly approaching day when treatment will be more specific and more effective than ever.

As family members struggle to learn and understand mental illness, they will find that their insight will grow exponentially if they simultaneously succor the life of the spirit. As they do so, scriptures will become more meaningful, prayer sweeter, contemplation more attuned to the Divine. As they draw closer to God and put their lives, and that of their loved one, in His hands, they will find they are never alone. They will come to realize, as perhaps never before, the price which Christ paid that He may know more perfectly how to personally sustain us through the seasons of our trials.

*Encourage the person who is ill*

Persons with mental illness, who often are worn down and disheartened by pervasive feelings of hopelessness, need encouragement and hope for the future. This must be realistic: "Pie in the sky" advice will lead only to discouragement, a sense of betrayal, and increased cynicism. But there are solid grounds for optimism in nearly every instance. The victim can with total assurance be reminded often of God's love, of the unfailing love of family members, and of the reality of eternal family relationships. There is hope, too, that the therapeutic future will be brighter for
sufferers from mental illnesses of all types.

Mentally ill persons should be encouraged to continue to pray, attend appropriate Church meetings, participate in sacred ordinances, and fulfill other religious obligations as they can. They will never benefit more from God's presence in their lives than now. They should be encouraged to do the ordinary little things that provide meaning to life—to appreciate the beauties of nature, complete appropriate tasks, and exercise. Such encouragement may help the afflicted person decide to cooperate more fully with treatment, gain self-esteem, even to work harder in therapy and be more diligent in taking prescribed medication.

*Maintain a life of your own*

If family members are to be of the most help to a loved one afflicted with mental illness, they must maintain a life of their own. They owe that to themselves, to the sufferer, to those in their family who are not sick, to friends and business associates, even to God. And so, somehow, in the midst of turmoil and stress, constant worry, time and financial pressures, and all else that bears down upon them, they must find time, even if only for a few minutes daily, to recharge their own reservoirs of strength. They may be rejuvenated by reading a good book, practicing a hobby, or listening to uplifting music. Quiet discussions with trusted friends, a telephone call to a family member, or an hour of service to others in a setting away from the patient may be helpful. The selection of activities is endless. How and what is chosen is less important than the realization that nurturing personal well-being is essential to the health of all family members.

In conclusion, we can help those suffering from mental illness in many ways. Perhaps the most important involve love and patience, coupled with the understanding that mental illness is not the patient's fault, not the result of sin, and cannot be overcome by an act of will. Learning all we can about the illness will increase our compassion, enhance our abilities to respond appropriately to those who suffer, and help all to develop faith and hope for a brighter tomorrow. More than all else, victims and their loved ones can, with perfect assurance, turn to Him who in His infinite compassion has taken upon Himself “the pains and the sicknesses of his people” (Alma 7:11). He, “through his infinite goodness and grace, will keep [us] through the endurance of faith on his name to the end” (Moroni 8:3). mf

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**Additional Reading**

Sean E. Brotherson (2004, August), *When your child is depressed, Ensign, 34*(8), 53.


**Notes**

3. Ibid., 543.
4. Ibid., 340.
5. Ibid., 398.
6. Ibid., 340.
7. Ibid., 274–278.
8. Ibid., 543.
We call upon responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society.¹

—“The Family: A Proclamation to the World”

Citizens of democratic governments enjoy great freedoms, but they also carry a burden of responsibility. Balancing strong individual freedoms and rights with personal and community responsibilities is a challenging task. I learned an important spiritual principle underlying responsible citizenship recently when I was reading from the Book of Mormon. In King Mosiah’s sermon on government in Mosiah 29, Mosiah was trying to convince his people to accept a new form of government rather than rely on a monarchy. “And many more things did king Mosiah write unto [his people], unfolding unto them all the trials and troubles of a righteous king, yea, all the travails of soul for their people, and also all the murmurings of the people to their king; and he explained it all unto them. And he told them that these things ought not to be; but that the burden should come upon all the people, that every man might bear his part” (Mosiah 29:33–34).

There is a moral principle here. All citizens should bear the burden of good government. Thus, when the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints “call upon responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society,”² they are not just suggesting that we get involved in good causes; I believe they are asking us to fulfill a moral duty that rests on citizens of a free society. Moreover, they are inviting us to focus our citizenship in a crucial
area: strengthening marriages and families. My purpose in this article is to encourage and facilitate such efforts.

There are many causes related to family life that need our involvement. One of the most crucial, contemporary challenges is the need to strengthen the institution of marriage. The divorce and sexual revolutions have diminished the institution of marriage and distorted its God-ordained purposes. But the good news is that in the United States and many other countries, the vast majority of people still value highly a good marriage, both as a personal goal and as an important element of a healthy society. In fact, in the United States, public efforts at federal, state, county, and community levels to strengthen marriages are emerging in significant numbers. Together, these efforts constitute a marriage movement. Opportunities to be involved are around us, and our strength is needed. I can think of no greater civic service that could be rendered by Latter-day Saints right now than giving time and resources to help this marriage movement grow.

To encourage involvement, I recommend that readers obtain a valuable booklet, "Strengthening Marriages In Your Community: 101 Ideas To Get You Started." (It can be ordered from www.smartmarriages.com for about $3; a portion of the booklet is available on-line.)

In the rest of this essay, I address two common questions about involvement. My responses draw on my knowledge of the marriage movement, especially efforts related to opposing same-sex marriage and promoting divorce reform. Finally, I suggest some guidelines for involvement.

Can a Group of Responsible Citizens Really Make a Difference?

As responsible citizens come together, they can influence the direction of public policy and laws related to marriage. Groups of Latter-day Saints have influenced one of the most heated contemporary debates—same-sex marriage. In 1999, the state of Vermont changed state laws to allow all the civic benefits of marriage to be given to same-sex couples in a legal form called a "civil union." Soon after that change occurred, I asked an active, knowledgeable veteran in the debate on same-sex marriage why Vermont succeeded in making this change when previous, similar efforts in Hawaii, Alaska, and California had failed. Her response was quick and surprising to me. She said the difference was the lack of a large population of Latter-day Saints in Vermont giving their time and resources to defeat same-sex marriage proposals. Latter-day Saints were involved in large numbers in defeating these efforts in the other states. In May 2004, the Supreme Court of Massachusetts ruled that the state must issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Other states may follow suit (and a handful of Western countries have legalized same-sex marriages).

I believe the involvement of Latter-day Saints, together with other responsible citizens, can make a decisive difference in how this legal and social debate plays out.

Same-sex marriage is only one of several important issues related to marriage, and may not be the most dangerous one. We have already seen a dramatic shift in the definition of marriage over the past 50 years with the divorce revolution. Personal happiness has become the defining purpose of marriage, replacing the traditional defining purpose of complete commitment to another and to the children produced by that union. Changing attitudes were cemented by legal change that created unilateral, no-fault...
divorce—one person could end a marriage at any time for any reason. But this notion of ego-centered, no-legal-strings, deregulated marriage produces weaker ties. The safety and security of an “until death do us part” commitment—in good times and bad—that vitally nourishes the kind of long-term love we yearn for, has decreased. This loss of the central pillar of marital permanence profoundly weakens marriage and works against individuals’ abilities to maintain a strong relationship.

The American poet Judith Viorst put it this way: “One advantage of marriage is that, when you fall out of love with him or he falls out of love with you, it keeps you together until you fall in again.”

But there are fewer individuals and groups willing to challenge the current ideological and legal regime of divorce compared to the many who are stepping up to challenge same-sex marriage initiatives. I believe the voices of responsible, concerned citizens should be heard on this important public issue, too. Elder Dallin H. Oaks pointed at this issue in a recent address: “No society is so strong that it can support continued increases in citizen as we increasingly ignore old responsibilities. For example, so-called no-fault divorces—which give either spouse the right to dissolve a marriage at will—have obscured the vital importance of responsibilities in marriage.” Elder Oaks suggested that no-fault divorce laws are leading our society down a dangerous path.

Various policy and legal reforms have been proposed to help reduce divorce. For instance, “covenant marriage” legislation has been adopted in three states in the United States and proposed in many more. Couples who choose covenant marriage in these states must receive premarital counseling and disclose anything to their future spouse that might reasonably affect the decision to marry; agree to get marital counseling if problems arise that threaten the marriage; and accept limited grounds for divorce (e.g., abuse, adultery, drug addiction, imprisonment) or a longer waiting period for divorce. Current
research is exploring whether this more binding form of marriage can reduce the chances that couples will divorce in the risky, early years of marriage.

Completely reversing unilateral, no-fault divorce laws probably is not possible, and I don’t believe it would be wise to do so. But there are legal reforms that would address some of the problems created by current divorce laws and do more to reinforce marital permanence. For instance, in addition to covenant marriage, a handful of states have passed (and more are considering) legislation to encourage couples to get premarital counseling or education. Research suggests that this can increase marital quality and reduce the incidence of divorce in the early, riskiest years of marriage. These kinds of modest policy changes to reduce divorce are possible when responsible citizens work hard to support them.

Our efforts to challenge divorce need not be limited to public, legal ones, however. One prominent marriage educator, Michelle Weiner-Davis, has spoken about "guerilla divorce busting." She argued that the common response when someone tells you he or she is thinking about getting a divorce is to offer sympathy and support for the decision to go ahead. Instead, she urges us to challenge those thoughts (except in cases of abuse and the like) and to suggest ways of reviving and saving an imperfect relationship rather than casting it aside. She believes these natural, interpersonal interventions can make an impression on many people and prevent unnecessary divorces. Research suggests that most unhappy marriages become happy again when people hold on through the bad times. In our interactions with others who are thinking about divorce, we can encourage them to take steps to revitalize their relationships.

**Can Just One Person Make a Difference?**

Some responsible, concerned citizens think that just one person cannot make much difference, especially if he or she is not acting in some professional capacity, or given a prominent platform from which to urge action. But consider the case of Julie Baumgartner, a citizen of Chattanooga, Tennessee, who wanted to improve her community by strengthening marriage, promoting responsible fathering, and reducing unwed pregnancies. She began as just one person talking to other like-minded individuals. Over a few years, she built a vibrant coalition of religious, corporate, and civic leaders into a community-wide organization that promotes these goals with concrete opportunities for marriage and family life education. Her organization, First Things First (www.firstthings.org), is now the premier model of how to build a community healthy marriage initiative.

The scriptures teach us "that by small means the Lord can bring about great things" (1 Nephi 16:29) and "out of small things proceedeth that which is great" (D&C 64:33). President Gordon B. Hinckley quoted the latter scripture when he said recently: "Remarkable consequences often flow from a well-written letter and a postage stamp. Remarkable results come of quiet conversation with those who carry heavy responsibilities."4

Speaking of troubling events occurring in cities, states, and nations that threaten what we revere, Elder Oaks reminds us that "we cannot afford to be indifferent or quiet. We must be ever vigilant to ask 'Where will it lead?' and to sound appropriate warnings or join appropriate preventive efforts while there is still time. Often we cannot prevent the outcome, but we can remove ourselves from the crowd who, by failing to try to intervene, has complicity in the outcome."5
Guidelines for Civic (and Civil) Involvement

How we get involved as responsible citizens to strengthen marriages and families makes a difference in how effective we are and how the Lord can multiply our efforts, like the loaves and fishes in the New Testament (John 6:5–14). I suggest four guidelines for effective involvement.

First, we need to be informed. Our active participation in public life will be more effective when we take the time to study the issues, learn about relevant research, and stay current. Fortunately, this is easier to do than ever before with the widespread availability of the Internet. There are many good web sites to visit to gain current information and research about marriage and family issues (see sidebar).

A second guideline is to collaborate with other like-minded individuals and groups. Sometimes we need to strike out on our own and build our own initiative, especially when there is no activity in an area. But I think our efforts usually will be more effective when we join with other initiatives, especially when these initiatives are already farther down the same or a similar road. Occasionally I have students come to me with a passion to do something to strengthen marriages and families. They usually have an idea for a new organization or initiative that they want to start up. I have seen a couple of wonderful successes blossom from these personal efforts. But generally, I encourage them at least to start by adding their energy to similar ongoing efforts, rather than duplicate or divide efforts. Of course, joining with others sometimes will require compromise. But there are ways to compromise without abandoning basic beliefs. For instance, I actively participate with an organization making an impact at the national level promoting healthy marriages. But the leader of this organization will not allow it to take a position for or against same-sex marriage. She does this because she knows that members of the organization have different opinions about this but all wish to strengthen marriage, however they define it. She does not want to divide the membership and dilute its effectiveness. Although she is getting pressure to change, I think she is making the right decision for this organization. Instead of fighting to change how this organization operates or divorcing myself from it, I have invested some energy in a different organization that is promoting passage of a constitutional amendment to prohibit same-sex marriages.
A third guideline is to strive to avoid contention and never promote it. This can be difficult when we are involved with moral principles to which we bring a lot of passion. But the Savior taught that “contention is not of me, but is of the devil . . . and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend . . . one with another” (3 Nephi 11:29). I don’t believe this principle is limited to relations among the Saints; I think it applies widely. In Alma 1, Mormon describes how the faithful were being persecuted by nonbelievers in their communities. Most of the Saints “bore with patience the persecution which was heaped upon them” (1:25). “Nevertheless, there were many among [the Church] who began to be proud, and began to contend warmly with their adversaries, even unto blows . . . Now this was . . . a cause of much affliction to the church; yea, it was the cause of much trial with the church” (1:22–23). And in our day, President Hinckley has urged us to let our voices be heard, but he cautions: “I hope they will not be shrill voices.”

If we resort to contention to accomplish our public purposes, we risk hardening our hearts and losing that crucial, added strength that comes from the Spirit of God. When contention comes at us despite our best efforts to avoid it, the scriptures teach us to be patient (Alma 1:25), not to revile against our enemies (1 Peter 2:23), to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), and to hold to the rod and ignore the mocking of the world (1 Nephi 8:27). If we shun contention, the Lord will fight our battles for us, and our efforts will be all the more fruitful for it.

I have been impressed with how Governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, who is a devout Latter-day Saint, has handled the struggle over same-sex marriage in his state. Based on his convictions of the sanctity of marriage, he has led his state’s effort to nullify the state’s supreme court ruling that legalized same-sex marriage. Yet the accounts that I have read and seen in the media suggest he has done this while striving to be respectful of the opposition and also respecting the constitutional processes operating in this struggle. He opened his testimony before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee on the Federal Marriage Amendment (which defines marriage as the union of a man and a woman) with these respectful words: “Like me, the great majority of Americans wish both to preserve the traditional definition of marriage and to oppose bias and intolerance directed towards gays and lesbians.” Similarly, Senator Gordon Smith (R-Oregon), also a devout Latter-day Saint, cast his vote in favor of the Federal Marriage Amendment while at the same time affirming his respect for gays and lesbians and his strong support for certain legal protections for a group that has experienced intolerance in our society.

In contrast, I have seen numerous leaders of pro-marriage groups, including Latter-day Saints, regularly speak disrespectfully and disingenuously about their opponents. All this seems to generate is media fodder; it does not advance the cause of right. The Lord is willing to bless our public efforts to strengthen marriages and families, but I believe that our civic efforts also must be civil if we are to claim that blessing.

A final guideline is that our desires to help strengthen other marriages and families in our communities should not come at the expense of our own spouses and children. Zeal has a way sometimes of overtaking our better judgment. “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36). I was impressed by how one young mother observed this principle. I called recently to ask her to consider accepting a
job with a significant national organization dedicated to strengthening marriages. She brought experience and the ideal combination of qualifications to the job. I knew that she would want flexibility in work arrangements and could not give her full time to the work, so I said that we would accommodate her situation as much as possible. She was intrigued and flattered by the invitation, but asked for a few days to think about it. When she called back she politely turned the position down. She said it was her time now to focus on her young family; and even with job flexibility she didn’t think she could do both jobs adequately. Although disappointed that an ideal candidate turned down the job opportunity, I deeply respected her decision. She continues to be involved in efforts to strengthen marriages and families, but she fits them into the temporal cracks of her busy family life rather than devoting herself fully to that cause at this time. “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1). In another season of her life, I’m confident she will bless others with her labors to strengthen marriages and families.

When our seasons and opportunities come, we have civic and spiritual duties to bear the burden of responsible citizenship. Offering our public gifts in the service of the most fundamental units of a healthy society—marriage and family—will help to preserve our freedom.

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NOTES
2. Ibid.

12. M. Weiner-Davis (2002, July), Guerrilla divorce butting; keynote address presented at the Smart Marriages Annual Conference, Crystal City, VA.
18. Senator Gordon H. Smith (2004, October 14), The case for amending the constitution to defend marriage; address given at the College of Family, Home, and Social Science Honored Alumni Lecture, Brigham Young University.

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Suggested Reading


Suggested Web Sites
National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, http://www.healthymarriages.info
Smart Marriages, http://www.smartmarriages.com
Marriage Movement, http://www.marriagemovement.org
Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, http://www.marriagedebate.com
Institute for American Values, http://www.americanvalues.org
First Things First, http://www.firstthings.org
“Love is nowhere more potent or more significant than in marriage and family life.”

— Bruce C. Hafen