Cleaving: Thoughts on Building Strong Families

Sister Chieko N. Okazaki

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol26/iss1/4
Cleaving: Thoughts on Building Strong Families

Sister Chieko N. Okazaki

First Counselor, Relief Society General Presidency 1990-1997
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

My dear brothers and sisters, aloha!

I am so delighted to be with you today for your annual convention. I always learn so much by spending a few hours seeing the professional challenges that you face, and even better, seeing how you share with each other the solutions that you have found as you have applied both professional study and personal prayer to these problems. I was so thrilled when Eileen DeGruccio told me that the theme for your conference is "In the Shelter of Our Homes: Empowering Families with Hope and Strength in the Midst of the Storms Around Us." I know that you exist as a professional group because people have problems. You chose your profession because you wanted to help. The people you see are people who are lacking in hope and strength. They are the people being battered by the storms that are not only around our homes but inside our homes. By giving the conference a positive phrasing and by creating a verbal vision of homes as shelter, I think you've already done much to increase the level of hope and strength that you have as you meet your clients.

It is interesting, brothers and sisters, how national thinking has swung to an emphasis on marriage and family, which is where the Church's emphasis has been all the time. Some of our national leaders could be giving sound bytes out of the Proclamation on the Family, and maybe they are. The General Authorities and local leaders have worked very hard to be sure that as many leaders as possible, as well as ordinary people, are exposed to the clearly stated principles of the proclamation.

My remarks today are titled: "Cleaving: Some Thoughts on Building Stronger Families." When I was invited to give this talk, I thought immediately of Jesus' instructions about marriage - and these instructions are also the picture of the ideal marriage:

For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh. Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. (Matthew 19:5)

Now I've read and heard this scripture literally hundreds of times, and it is obviously talking about unity. How could you be more united than two people being one flesh? But thinking about it, I realized that I didn't actually know what "cleave" meant. In fact, I was confused. I knew what a cleaver was. I use one all the time...
when chopping up meat and vegetables for sukiyaki. But that couldn’t possibly be what Jesus meant when he talked about “cleaving to,” was it? I looked a little further in the scriptures. Romans 12:9 talks about “cleaving to that which is good” and Jacob 6:5 talks about “cleaving unto God as he cleaveth unto you.” But the Doctrine and Covenants (45:48) predicts that when Jesus sets foot upon the Mount of Olives at his second coming “it shall cleave in twain.” That sounds more like what I do on my chopping board. And what about all of those instructions about “cloven-hoofed” animals in Deuteronomy (e.g., 14:7)? Or that line in the hymn (Hymns, p. 111): “Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in thee”?

By now I was thoroughly confused, which is always a state of mind for me in which I am prepared to learn something. So I went to the Bible dictionary. The word is not even in it. So I hauled out Webster’s dictionary and there discovered that there really are two meanings of the word, and they come from two etymological roots.

The first meaning is the kitchen meaning of “to divide by … a cutting blow; split, separate into distinct parts and especially into groups having divergent views.” Etymologically, this word is related to the Greek glyphein, “to carve;” the Latin glubere, “to peel;” Old Norse kljufa, “to split;” and Old English cleofan, which means the same thing: “to split.”

The second meaning of the word is “to adhere firmly and closely; or loyally and unwaveringly; see stick.” This form of the word comes from the Old Norse and Old English words for “clay” which is daeg in Old English and is related to kleben in Old High German. The verb form is the Old English clfian, meaning “to stick.”

Now clfian is not pronounced too much differently from cleofan, which is why both of them have yielded the word cleave in modern English; but their origins and meanings are the exact opposite. The cleofan form will split kindling or granite or chop vegetables into chunks while the clfian form is like sticky clay that glues things together. An Old English family, then, would cleave [glue] clay into the cracks of a mud-and-wattle wall of its hut to keep out the rain and then make the interior warm by cleaving [split] wood in small chunks for the fire.

You counselors and psychotherapists see a lot of families in the kitchen-cleaver stage but they have come to you because what is being cleaved apart is a family unit that began with the hopes and dreams of glue—cleaving so close together that they could become one flesh. I don’t have to tell you how hard this job [glue] can be once this process [split] begins.

Well, today I certainly have no special expertise on how, exactly, you can do that. You’re the experts. You’re professionally trained to supply that sheltering space in which hope and strength can take root again. It would be foolish and a waste of time for me to try to tell you how to do your jobs. But as I prayerfully thought about what to share with you, I came to the conclusion that I have had the immense privilege of talking to women all over the world. They have shared with me their faith and their fears and their frustration. They have shared their joy and their anger, their sorrow and their peace.

Every one of these women, whether they have been single or married, mothers or childless, have to deal with the same problems. They have to be strong to meet the challenges that confront them. They have to find ways of living the gospel in a world that looks very different to the eyes of faith than to the eyes of unbelief. They are all called upon to love the unlovable and forgive the forgivable. They all have to come to Christ as individuals.

For some, the greatest challenges are within their own homes. For others, home is the shelter where they regain their strength for going out and tackling difficult situations that await them there.

I would like to do three things in this talk. First, to share with you some of my thoughts about how to build strong marriages. Second, to share some thoughts about the importance of building strong parent-child relationships. And then I would like to share with you a cause dear to my heart which I think will strengthen already-strong homes and make a place in even severely damaged families in which family members may begin to find shelter and apply the little drops of glue that can stick them together instead of the cutting blow that separates them into different parts.

Making Strong Marriages

A few days ago, I was reading the answers of some children to questions about various Bible stories. This time the particular question was, “How did Adam and Eve spend an average day in the Garden of Eden?” Twelve-year-old Craig hypothesized: “Probably they took long walks in the new moonlight that God had created and tried to figure out what to do about loneliness.
That's when they decided to have the first children. Eight-year-old Catherine took a more aesthetic approach. She said: "They drew pictures of God and colored them in with crayons they made out of vegetables," adding, "Most of the pictures of God came out green." And nine-year-old Jerome was already a philosopher. He said: "They had deep talks about what they were there for ... people have been trying to figure that out ever since." (Heller, 1994, p. 15).

Well, we have an advantage perhaps in knowing what we're here for, but I suspect that, on average, we have just as much trouble as the next person in trying to figure out what to do about it.

Ann Landers is certainly not in the same category as the scriptures, but what she says will sound familiar to you. She got a letter from three men who, with their wives in a group, were discussing the quality of the marriages they observed around them. They asked Ann what she thought about this question: "If you had it to do over again, would you marry the person to whom you are now married?"

Ann Landers ran that question in her column on Valentine's Day of 1977. She says (1996, p.21), "Within 10 days, my office was bombarded with more than 50,000 pieces of mail, and letters continued to pour in for weeks after." She requested only postcards, but more than 7,000 took the time to write a letter about whether they would or would not remarry their current spouse. Thirty percent signed their cards and letters — and 70% of that group "said yes, they would marry the same person again" while the rest wouldn't. Women wrote 80% of these signed cards and letters; men wrote the rest.

The unsigned cards and letters were much more evenly divided: "48% said yes, and 52% said no. The breakdown according to sex was 70% from females and 30% from males." Then she gave a sampling of the responses (1996, pp. 19-21):

• From San Jose, Calif: A wife wrote: "I may feel different tomorrow, but tonight I am voting no. It's Valentine's Day, and this clown to whom I've been married for 15 years (5 children) didn't even give me a card."
• A man in Pittsburgh sent two dozen cards (unsigned). On each card, he wrote (in green ink), "I vote no. She's murder."
• A woman from San Francisco wrote a letter saying, "I voted no yesterday. I was drunk. My husband is an angel — a lot better than I deserve. Please change my vote to yes."
• From Davenport, Iowa: "Female, married 27 years. We are the happiest couple in town. I vote yes." At the bottom of the card, hastily scrawled in pencil, was a word from her husband, who obviously had been asked to drop the card in the mailbox. He wrote, "That's what she thinks! I vote no."
• From Akron Ohio: "I am 12 years old. I read your column every day. My parents got into a fight tonight over how to vote in your survey. My mother said she was voting no because my dad spends too many nights playing backgammon. Dad said their marriage was a lot better than most — even with her griping about him playing so much backgammon. He said he would vote yes. The conversation suddenly turned to how much my mother's brother cost my dad in business. I think you'd better put them both down as no."
• From Oklahoma City: "In the 32 years we've been married, my husband never once told me he loved me — even though I asked him several times. He always answered, 'I'm not the mushy type.' Tonight, he clipped out your column and wrote across it: 'Yes. She is a beautiful person. I'm a lucky man. I cried like a baby. Make that two yeses from O. City."

Brothers and sisters, the point is this — and as professionals you already know this — get your information about what Latter-day Saint women are thinking and feeling about their marriages directly from them, not from their spouse. And of course, the same goes for what men are thinking and feeling. Surveys about marital satisfaction and other sources of statistical information are helpful in painting a broad picture, but they can't predict what answers you will get from individuals. Furthermore, as you already know, many members of marital couples, especially the women, may feel confused about their feelings. Sometimes when women hear in lessons and talks that righteousness is happiness and if they're being obedient and working hard and holding family home evening and reading the scriptures and fulfilling their callings, then they must be happy. Well, if they're not happy, it's sometimes very difficult for them to figure out why they're not happy — and, most especially, what to do about it.

It has been my experience (and you would know this better than I) that many women don't have a way to process their feelings that don't fit the model, so they try to cope in one of three ways. First, they deny their real
feelings or repress them. Second, they admit that they're experiencing difficulty, but they minimize these discrepant feelings by saying, “This is just a bad phase I'm going through” or “It's true I'm not very happy, but that's not important.” Or third, they blame themselves.

It takes much patient listening and careful questions, and especially an environment of support and love and understanding, for many of these sisters to feel safe enough to start exploring their confused and confusing feelings. Such expressions come with difficulty and hedged about with many qualifiers. They say, “I'm not complaining, but ...” “I know I'm lucky to have a husband who's active in the Church, but ...” “I know our bishop is already too busy but ...” or “It doesn't really affect my testimony but ...” They don't want others to think they're whining or unappreciative or unwilling to serve. They're actually incredibly positive, appreciative, and willing to serve, “but ...”

It is at the point where they say “but ...” that they can start to recognize and deal with the problems. As professionals, you are aware of the fact that both men and women (but perhaps women more frequently than men) are used to hearing messages and trying very hard to follow those messages. As a result, if they receive counsel from a father or a bishop or even a therapist suggesting that their problems can be quickly and easily solved if they will only do one or two simple things, sometimes they will accept this counsel only to discover it doesn't work. Then they experience increased struggles — once again blaming themselves or minimizing their problems and denying their real feelings.

I am not going to share the personal experiences of these women who have confided in me. Because you also have professional requirements about keeping confidences, I know you will understand. But Wendy Top, who is the author of an inspirational book for women and their need to find freedom in Christ and his atonement (2000), says that she used to be one of these women. She writes:

For a time, I paid a high and ongoing price in the form of clinical depression for trying to match up to the mirage of “Molly Mormon/Patty Perfect.” I spent many years trying to do every good thing I saw in others (sometimes resenting them for it) or heard about at church or read about in the Ensign. For instance, I would see Sister A with all her lovely children and think, “I should be having more children. I am supposed to have a lot of children like Sister A.”

I would hear in Relief Society about how everyone loved Sister B because she was always the first person to bring in a meal or give a baby shower, and I would think how selfish I was with my time and how I should be more like Sister B. In sacrament meeting I heard Sister C say that her family had never missed a family home evening, and I felt unworthy because we missed quite regularly. I fretted that my husband and I should be as faithful as Sister C and her husband. I often mistook well-intentioned Mormon traditions for carved-in-stone commandments. I got caught on the treadmill of trying to do everything I was ever asked to do in the Church, being concerned about what others might think if my children didn't earn their award, causing strife in my marriage because my husband drank Coke. The list could go on ... I just assumed that if it was taught in the Church, or if other LDS sisters were doing it, it was part of the gospel and I had to do it. (Top, 2000, pp. 10-11)

So that's the first point I want to make. Many times, the barriers to happier, holier living for women is their feeling that they shouldn't have any problems living the gospel, that being the wife of an active Melchizedek Priesthood holder and having a temple marriage should have trouble-proofed their marriage, and that their lives have to be lived out according to one true script.

I strongly feel that the best way to build happier, healthier families is by strengthening individuals, and that the best way to do that is to strengthen their faith and hope in Christ. There are actually two parts to this. The first part is that women need to be strong individuals, not weak. Sister Barbara W. Winder, a past General President of the Relief Society, commented:

Sometimes we hear of priesthood bearers being overly critical of their wives and children. Some time ago I was visiting a region where a joint priesthood/Relief Society leadership meeting was held. One of the priesthood leaders was the husband of the Relief Society president. During the meeting principles of cooperation were discussed and expressions of appreciation were given for the opportunity to work together. But the actions of this couple spoke louder than words. He treated her as a servant, thrusting her his coat to hang up, criticizing her cooking and homemaking skills, and scolding the children for minor infractions. (Winder, 1988, pp. 64-65)
CLEAVING STRONG FAMILIES

Sister Winder then quoted President Spencer W. Kimball as saying in his priesthood meeting address in October 1979:

Our sisters do not wish to be indulged or to be treated condescendingly; they desire to be respected and revered as our sisters and our equals. I mention all these things, my brethren, not because the doctrines or the teachings of the Church regarding women are in any doubt, but because in some situations our behavior is of doubtful quality. (Kimball, 1979, p. 49)

Then Sister Winder concluded:

Let neither [men nor women] envy the other for their differences; let both discern what is superficial and what is basic in those differences and act accordingly. And may the brotherhood of the priesthood and the sisterhood of the Relief Society be a blessing in the lives of all members of the Church as we help each other along the path of perfection. (Winder, 1988, p. 65)

A strong marriage is one in which the partners have learned to cleave together [glue], not cleave apart [split]. Service and self-sacrifice are foundational principles of the gospel. In a marriage, I think it is true that one partner will be called upon to be forbearing and patient and self-sacrificial with the weaknesses of the other; but there is something lopsided and wrong if only one partner in the marriage is always called upon for self-sacrifice or if only one partner is always required to be patient. You will know best how to redress such lopsidedness. Some of the women I have listened to have not had good experiences in therapy. As a result, I also feel that any approach or technique or instruction that is aimed at strengthening one individual by weakening a second individual will ultimately backfire, even if the first individual is motivated by love and self-sacrifice to cooperate with such a program of weakening.

I subscribe wholeheartedly to the importance of strong families! I could not be a more fervent believer in the proposition that each child will thrive best in a family with two loving and righteous parents. I know the importance of righteous priesthood leadership in the home; in fact, my husband's priesthood power literally saved my life on one occasion. And I realize that there are strong and righteous men who are patiently doing far more than their share because the wives and mothers who should be their appreciative full partners are behaving irresponsibly. In other words, if there is a problem with creating partnerships in marriages, my sense is that both husbands and wives need to sacrifice, accommodate, and compensate.

Of course no marriage is going to be successful if either partner is scrupulously keeping track of who works longer or harder, who makes the most sacrifices, and who is giving more to the relationship. I am not suggesting that couples in trouble should be taught to be better accountants. I am suggesting that they should be taught to be better partners. In our current culture, you may assume that this means teaching them to adopt traditional roles of relating to each other and stop making a fuss about it. Instead, consider very carefully the strengths and weaknesses of everyone in the family— even pray for inspired insight—and then find ways to help husbands and wives become partners to each other and help parents and children become partners to each other. Building a peaceful and loving home will take every ounce of love, strength, and sacrifice that both partners possess. As someone once remarked: "Chains do not hold a marriage together. It is threads, hundreds of tiny threads which sew people together through the years." (Signoret, 1996, p. 8) Here's a little story to keep in mind:

Eliza met a tailor when he was 20. He had never been to school. She married him. Taught him to read, write, spell. He learned fast. Became President. Inherited post-Civil War reconstruction problems. Beat an impeachment rap by just one vote after trying to fire his Secretary of War for justifiable reasons. Bought Alaska from the Russians for $7 million. Lost his try at a second term. Ran for U.S. Senate instead, and won. His name? Andrew Johnson. America will reach its full maturity when an Andrew does the same for an Eliza. (Bits & Pieces, 1986, p. 2)

So the first request is to listen carefully to what women say, including the things they have not yet been able to articulate even to themselves. Strengthen women as marriage partners by strengthening them as individuals who turn to Christ, who are guided by the power of his spirit, and who feel the hope and joy that come from his love. Focus on the unity [glue] that comes from cleaving together as partners rather than splitting [cleaver] apart.

After all, brothers and sisters, Jesus asked husband
and wife to become “one flesh” (Matthew 19:5). But you can’t become “one flesh” if the husband is flesh but the wife is just a pretty embroidered dishtowel or a cardboard cut-out of a woman.

**Motherhood and Fatherhood**

The second message is about becoming better parents. It is about doing the glue kind of cleaving instead of the splitting kind of cleaving. Nearly all of the women I know love their children with all their hearts and are doing absolutely the best they can for them. Now I know that you see careless, negligent, even criminal parenting among your clients. Mothers and fathers continually need to learn parenting skills to help them create a loving environment for the family, and the same is true for you to continually help parents to acquire those skills.

My heart is wrapped around my sons and the two wonderful women they have brought into our family and the children that have been born into those families. Quite simply, nothing else is as important to me as they are. But I have listened to the stories of many women who feel that their lives are wasted and useless because their children have made some negative choices. And I also listen to the pain of single women who are subtly excluded because they have no children.

I want to share some very touching statements by children about their mothers: Eleven-year-old Ling Tai said: “My mother is like the weather and I am just a seed. Without the sun or the rain I would not be able to grow into a flower, healthy and beautiful. Her warmth and love makes me grow. Bigger and bigger.” Erica Llantoudes, now age seventeen, searched her memory back to her first consciousness to describe her mother: “Even when she is angry, her eyes are never looking at me angrily. Since the day I remember myself I never saw her looking at my sister or me angrily.” Six-year-old Rachel Darbon marveled at her mother’s mysterious powers: “When it is time for me to tidy up my bedroom I hide things under the bed. I don’t know how she knows they are there.” And the last statement again comes from Ling Tai: “My life is like a long piece of string, full of knots. But my mother’s love is another piece of long string, with no tangles no knots. It just runs forever” (Exley, 1992).

These are very tender expressions. They capture what I think is the universal desire of women all over the world to be good mothers. I know that there are many reasons why women fail in that goal. Some of them are too inexperienced. Some of them have received very bad mothering themselves and are still immature children themselves. Some of them are too exhausted by their lives and problems. Some of them are too frightened by the immensity of the task of mothering.

You not only have to deal professionally with these mothers, trying to help them grow past their limitations so that they can be the kind of mothers they want to be, but all too often you also have to deal, fifteen or twenty or thirty years later, with the children who have been neglected or abused or emotionally starved because of the inadequacies of these mothers. Help them to remember that part of the glory of the gospel is not only that we have a loving Father in Heaven who holds out the promise to every worthy woman of eternal motherhood, but that we also have a Mother in Heaven, about whom we will remember more some day. Perhaps it is true that each mother inherits part of her motherhood and invents part of it, but I think it would inspire women to be reminded that they can remember and recover an eternal model of motherhood – and that, whatever the inadequacies of their mortal father and mother, they have eternal parents who are fulfilling in every way.

And let me tell you just two stories to remind us that children sometimes have their own agendas: One mother who was teaching her children about fire safety quizzed them: “What’s the first thing you should do when the smoke alarm goes off?” Her five-year-old son immediately answered, “Take dinner out of the oven!” And another mother reported playing a Bible song called “Train Up a Child” for her daughter, Emily, who asked what “train up” meant. The mother explained that “it means to teach children about God and the difference between right and wrong.”

“Are you and Daddy training me up?” Emily asked. “We’re trying to,” the mother said.

Emily turned back to the stereo and muttered, “We’ll see about that!” (Christian Parenting Today, 2000, p. 16).

Brothers and sisters, probably most of you are parents as well as therapists. So you know that we are all in this together. All of us need all the hands we have got, or can enlist, to keep rowing and bailing (so to speak) at the same time. None of us has a spare hand with which to point fingers at someone else. I’m just glad that AMCAP members, as a group, have miraculously sprouted extra limbs so that, in addition to doing your own rowing and bailing, you can offer a
helping hand to parents who will do better when they know better, thanks to you.

**Family Reading**

The third point I want to make is about a cause that is dear to my heart. This cause is reading to children— but I would like to describe its many positive possibilities as family reading. Having a “library for learning” is one of the four points that President Thomas S. Monson outlined in his “Hallmarks of a Happy Home.” He said:

> Reading is one of the true pleasures of life. In our age of mass culture, when so much that we encounter is abridged, adapted, adulterated, shredded, and boiled down, it is mind-easing and mind-inspiring to sit down privately with a congenial book. (Monson, 2001, p.5)

This is certainly true, but it is his next sentence that I want to focus on: “Young children also enjoy books and love to have their parents read to them.” Family reading has its own dynamic. The other three hallmarks that President Monson mentions are “a pattern of prayer, a legacy of love, and a treasuring of testimony” (Monson, 2001).

These qualities do indeed characterize happy homes, but I would submit to you that reading is a little different. Reading can be an entering point toward happiness even when a home is desperately and apparently terminally unhappy. There may be so much conflict in a home that prayers become opportunities for political statements, love seems like only a distant dream, and one person’s testimony becomes a club to beat up another member of the family. In such circumstances, reading is a neutral and low-conflict activity that can form the foundation for adding prayer, love, and testimony.

One of my friends, Nancy Kerr, is president of the Reading Foundation in Kennewick, Washington (see: www.readingfoundation.org/home.asp). The local school district has set as a resolute goal the challenge of being sure that 90% of the third-graders graduate from that class reading at or above grade level [see Rosier, 2002] since they have discovered that children who aren’t caught up at that point may never catch up for their entire academic careers. Nancy’s job is to get parents reading to children twenty happy minutes a day from birth (Fielding, Kerr & Rosier, 1998, pp. 74-75). And I mean literally from birth. One of their projects is to send newborns home from the community hospitals with a reading kit containing a library card, a first book, pamphlets about reading, and a baby bib proclaiming in cross-stitch “Read to Me!” [see Kerr, 2002].

I became aware of Nancy and her group at the same time that Karen Morgan here in Utah was successfully working for passage of a bill to mandate accountability and grade-level testing. And of course our Relief Society general presidency, during the term of our office, had stressed literacy as a worldwide service project. But what really kept my attention was my little grandson, Kenzo, who just turned two and who lives near enough that I can see him almost every day. We spend a lot of time reading to each other, and he is already to the stage where he will announce, “I read, Nana!” and recite the entire text of a book, turning the pages at the appropriate intervals.

I enjoy these sessions enormously, but just the other day, while reading with Kenzo, I focused briefly not upon all the good things that were happening, but upon all the bad things that were not happening. And I realized that much of the tension and conflict in dysfunctional families simply couldn’t happen in a reading setting. For instance,

- There was no shouting, no squabbling, and no shoving. Kenzo was sitting happily next to me, “being cozy” as he says. We were conversing in quiet tones and laughing a lot. I was praising him for identifying letters or explaining pictures. In short, it was a completely positive interaction that did not leave room for a negative interaction.
- It is an orderly experience but one that does not require much planning. It avoided the extreme regimentation that would not accommodate personal feelings or the situation of the moment, but it also had enough structure that it was not just random, potentially dangerous or disobedient behavior.
- It eliminated one of the things that children get into a lot of trouble for, namely, being messy or destructive. Kenzo was turning the pages carefully. He knew how to put books down and pick them up. He was learning to respect property, and in this case, his own.
- It eliminated a lot of the fatiguing noise and irritating chatter of a radio or TV that is on constantly in the background. Kenzo and I were deeply involved in an experience with words, but it was purposeful, meaningful words. We were selecting the images, rather than simply accepting whatever came in from the TV or radio.
- It eliminates competition for time and attention. Isn’t reading a good way to produce security for a child, giving him a lot of control over a desired and desirable
activity that will guarantee him the attention of a significant adult? Granted, Kenzo is a first child, so it is easy for me and his parents to give him undivided attention frequently. Individual reading might not be possible in households with many children, particular children who are close in age; but group reading is a possibility. There are a lot of advantages to reading individually with a child (or having the child read to the parent) if a parent can manage it.

- It eliminates or controls some of the fear of new experiences by providing a bridge to the larger world. Kenzo likes bugs, so I brought over a new book about insects the other day. We read the book and then we went outside where he squatted down and observed the ants in the garden with fascination for a long time. When the ants finally disappeared in their anthill, he straightened up, looked all around the yard, stared into the sky, and shouted, “Magnifie, Nana!” There was a bird I had identified for him only a few days earlier and which he remembered. Then he announced with great satisfaction, “There’s a lot of creatures around. It’s a wild world, Nana!” Maybe he’ll be a philosopher, too, when he’s nine! And he is not filled with fear or anxiety about the world outside his home.

Now, brothers and sisters, I said at the beginning of this talk that it would be foolish of me to suggest therapeutic techniques for you. I still feel that way, but please evaluate this suggestion on its merits. There’s no law that says reading to each other has to stop when a child turns six or nine or sixteen. Maybe a parent and a child have a relationship so conflicted that there are very few things they can talk about, and you wish you could just give them a script and have them stumble through a few pleasant speeches, just so they get the idea. Well, reading to each other can be a way to do just that. They don’t have to talk about chores or their relationship or getting in on time or their grades. They can just enjoy twenty minutes of Huckleberry Finn or The Secret Garden or stories about Jesus.

An older child who wouldn’t tolerate being read to or reading aloud to a parent might not be so prickly if he or she is reading to a younger brother or sister, and the results are the same. It is an nondistracting, positive activity that provides both spontaneity and structure. It simply eliminates a whole range of negative behaviors – at least for those twenty minutes – and there are all of the positive results too. What if a beleaguered parent, instead of wishing the kids would simply disappear, was thinking of ways to do household chores together so that one of the children can be reading aloud while the parents and other children work together.

Think of all the time families spend in the car. I’m sure, if there are three people in the car, there are at least four opinions about which radio station or which CD they should listen to. Wouldn’t a couple of chapters from Swiss Family Robinson or from the high school U.S. history assignment provide a better launching pad for family interaction?

And what about a husband and wife? They may not have good ways of talking to each other yet. They may not trust each other enough to be honest. They may not love each other enough to share their hearts and their thoughts. They may even feel too hurt and damaged to pray together. But if they were reading (say, the scriptures) together aloud twenty minutes a day – in the car, after breakfast, during food preparation or clean up – isn’t this an activity that is structured enough to be safe, neutral enough to reduce conflict, and positive enough to provide a bridge toward communication upon which even tentative steps may be taken toward each other?

One of the most inspiring stories that Nancy Kerr told (Fielding, et al, 1998) was about visiting a child development class at the high school. One of the unmarried teenage mothers had just given birth and had brought her baby daughter to class for the first time. The teacher brought out one of the reading kits and whispered to Nancy:

“This is something you might like to see…”

The girl’s friends were admiring the baby and asking questions such as “How much does she weigh?” and “How was the delivery?” When there was a pause, [Nancy said,] I offered my compliments and added, “I hope you’re reading to her!”

“Of course! Every night,” responded the new mother swiftly. “Her father and I even read to her before she was born.”

Stunned at the image of two unwed teens reading to their unborn child, [Nancy] managed to ask, “How did you know to do that?”

Before she could answer, another teen jumped in, “Twenty minutes a day! It’s everywhere – radio, TV, newspapers. You’ve got to read to children.” (Fielding, et al, 1998, p. 35)

Brothers and sisters, I have been appalled and concerned at the statistics of illegitimate births in the United States. This birth was one of those statistics. But
the image of a teenage boy taking his turn to read to the bulge in his girlfriend's abdomen before the birth of the baby they had conceived under who knows what conditions, fills me with a lot of hope that their little daughter might not grow up as one of America's neglected children in one of America's poverty-stricken families.

**Conclusion**

Dear brothers and sisters of AMCAP, thank you for giving me this space in which to share my thoughts. Remember the etymological explorations as to how “cleave” can mean both splitting asunder and gluing together. Remember how we began, with the nine-year-old philosopher who thinks that Adam and Eve spent a typical day in the Garden of Eden by having “deep talks about what they were there for” – and that we’ve been trying to figure this out ever since (Heller, 1994, p. 15).

Then remember my request that you listen carefully to the stories and also the silences of women so that they can become stronger partners by becoming stronger individuals. Help them turn to Christ, learn to rejoice in his love, to rely on the power of his atonement, and draw on his unfailing strength during difficult times.

Second, I talked about women as mothers and asked you, for the sake of both mothers and fathers, to strengthen both men and women in being good parents.

And third, I shared with you my own passion about teaching children to read and reading with them – and continuing to read, not only for all of the good things it brings with it but also because of all the dysfunction it can eliminate, or at least hold at bay, for twenty minutes. Remember Kenzo, happy and contented in his “wild world,” and remember the unwed teenage couple reading to their unborn daughter.

President Gordon B. Hinckley will be known for many mighty works and words in this generation, but perhaps his most significant work will be that of providing the blessings of the temple to many thousands of members for whom family sealings would have remained only a cherished but distant dream. This achievement is coupled with the standard he has held up for responsible, loving, and disciplined family life. Let me close with his vision of how to empower families with hope and strength – a vision that energizes your work. He says:

I believe in the family where there is a husband who regards his companion as his greatest asset and treats her accordingly; where there is a wife who looks upon her husband as her anchor and strength, her comfort and security; where there are children who look to mother and father with respect and gratitude; and where there are parents who look upon those children as blessings and find a great and serious and wonderful challenge in their nurture and rearing. The cultivation of such a home requires effort and energy, forgiveness and patience, love and endurance and sacrifice, but it is worth all of these and more. (Hinckley, 1997, p. 205)

I bear witness to the power and eternal truthfulness of that vision, and I do it in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

**References**


