

"When the Light Had Departed . . . I Went Home"

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Joseph Smith's home offered him sanctuary from bitter trials and public persecution, yet his Palmyra cabin was primitive and rustic, with no traces of professional interior decorating. The cleaning challenges of constantly tracked-in mud, lack of indoor plumbing, soot and smoke from the fire, and, above all, a large family housed in small quarters must have been insurmountable. But the sanctuary didn't exist inside the four walls of a boyhood home; it lay in the hearts of believing, loving parents--parents whose reaction to their teenage son's problems consisted not of embarrassment but of unconditional acceptance and a firm belief in his mission. The sanctuary of a home in which parents offer trust, hope, forgiveness, and unconditional love transcends physical space and endures beyond childhood. It becomes a life-sustaining force, helping children to suffer, grow, and overcome throughout their lives.

I've read biographies of people nurtured in this love who find that even life's most harrowing circumstances cannot extinguish its power. Gerda Weissman Klein, a Jewish concentration camp survivor, describes it well in her biography, *All But My Life*. "Love is great, love is the foundation of nobility, it conquers obstacles and is a deep well of truth and strength," she observes. "The greatness of [my parents'] love . . . ignited within me a spark that continued to glow through the years of misery and defeat. The memory of their love--my only legacy--sustained me in happy and unhappy times in Poland, Germany, Czechoslovakia, France, Switzerland, England. It is still part of me, here in America."

My husband and I are grateful for the sanctuary of our childhood homes; however, we're even more thankful for our parents' unconditional acceptance during our years as single adults, many of which were spent away from home. The refuge of my parents' love took on a life of its own through telephone wires as I called home for comfort, confirmation, and direction from various college dormitories and roommate-filled apartments. The most important of those phone calls happened when, after Mom and Dad had helped me move across the country for a job, I called to say the Spirit was prompting me to go on a mission. Their support of that particular decision has been one of their greatest gifts to me.

With examples like these--combined with a wonderful husband and professional experience writing about family issues--you would think creating a sanctuary for my own children would come naturally. It has not. My personality is headstrong, demanding, and

easily exasperated. My children are closely spaced and not perfect. What comes naturally to me are unrealistic expectations, shrieks of agitation, overdramatic looks of disapproval, and long-winded lectures.

Far less easy for me to achieve have been the fruits of the Spirit mentioned in the New Testament: "joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, [and] meekness" (Galatians 5:22-23)--the divine love so well described in 1 Corinthians. Charity and unconditional love involve a willingness to "suffereth long" through children's never-ending mistakes and lapses in judgment. It requires the ability to "envieth not" other families and other children. A home of refuge avoids being "puffed up" and "seeketh not her own" in worrying more about what the world thinks than what God thinks. Hardest for me is not being "easily provoked," because a sanctuary home "beareth all things, . . . hopeth all things, [and] endureth all things" (see 1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

I know I am not alone in having difficulty creating this charitable refuge with my very human disposition. Hearing other mothers relate what pushes their tolerance to the limit is a source of consolation to me. One friend asked her older, competent kids to prepare the younger ones for church and, when it was time to go, found them all still in pajamas playing a board game. Thanks. Another painstakingly and meticulously readied her daughters for a picture-taking session and, upon arriving at the studio, discovered the girls had been playing with a pen in the car and had covered their dresses with ink. I have a particularly hard time with teenagers--already late for school, slowly eating their breakfast while they read the cereal box, gradually bringing each spoonful to the mouth as the carpool honks outside.

I relate to an incident described several years ago in a *New York Times* feature article on large families. In it a Minnesota mother of 3 biological and 14 internationally adopted children describes her family-trip fiasco: "There were two kids in the way back fighting, they wouldn't stop, we were on the highway and I yelled, from the front seat: 'That's IT. I've HAD it. I'm coming back!' " Mrs. Kayes made it almost to the back seat before getting a paralyzing leg cramp, which resulted in her children having to hoist her hand-over-hand back to the front. At least, noted the reporter, this mother had "gotten the attention of the squabbling pair in back, who shut up, awestruck, to watch."

With the passage of time, anecdotes like these seem funny. Other mistakes our children make involve too much disappointment, sometimes, to laugh about. The challenge then is to discipline and set limits, of course, but to do so using the Doctrine and Covenants' admonitions of "love unfeigned," "showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reprov'd, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy" (D&C 121:41, 43).

I cannot accomplish this kind of sanctuary with willpower, goal setting, and especially my myriad of shortcomings combined with the frustrations of child rearing. However, I can accomplish it grace by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. As mothers we cannot rear our children in love and righteousness without relying on the merits of the Savior to compensate for our inevitable failings (see 2 Nephi 28:23). His love fills the void when ours is lacking. His Atonement helps us overcome, or at least improve on, so many weaknesses--that I know firsthand. "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13). Further encouragement comes from Moroni, who assures us that charity is a gift from God. We don't need to be born with it; we need to pray for it "with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love" (Moroni

7:48).

Before the Savior makes "weak things become strong" (Ether 12:27), however, He shows us our weaknesses. Still, the realization that my home had become less than a sanctuary took a while to sink in. After all, I am a conscientious mother who doesn't spank, reads bedtime stories, chauffeurs eight kids around in a big van, and wears out every pair of pants at the knee playing on the floor. But as my kids had gotten older, I had become too intent on their achievements, too discouraged by their normal growing pains and mistakes, and too addicted to my day-planner to make time to listen to their needs or participate in the "wholesome recreational activities" encouraged by the proclamation on the family.

A turning point occurred several years ago when our family went to Temple Square and happened upon a display featuring the Church's Home Front commercials. Scene after scene showed parents defusing tense, frustrating, and potentially anger-filled situations with patience, humor, attention, and playfulness.

Boy: Mom, she's hitting me.

Mom: You guys knock it off. I'm not really sure what exit I'm supposed to be looking for.

Boy: I think we're lost.

Mom: No, we're not lost. Your dad knows exactly where we are.

Boy: So, where are we?

Dad: We're . . . on vacation.

Announcer: Family, isn't it about time?

Mom: Good answer.

Boy: Look, a dead possum. Cool!

Announcer: From The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Dad: I'm home!

Boy: Dad, you're not mad at me, are you?

Dad: I am . . . if you didn't save me some of those chips.

Boy: I did. Here.

Mom: I cannot believe you two.

Announcer: Patience.

Mom: You forgot the dip.

Announcer: Use it before you lose it.

Dad: Whew. That was close.

Announcer: From The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Those commercials switched on a tiny microchip in my brain. Perhaps *switched on* is even too drastic a phrase. A vague sensation of wanting to change, of wanting not to get mad all the time, flickered through my mind, almost subconsciously. But it was enough.

Not all of us experience a mighty change of heart dramatically or instantaneously. "For every Paul, for every Enos, and for every King Lamoni," said President Benson, "there are hundreds and thousands of people who find the process of repentance much more subtle, much more imperceptible." *Subtle* and *imperceptible* describe the changes I've undergone at the hands of a Father in Heaven who requires my willingness, however faint, before He can begin a true change of heart. And it seems those changes need to take place many times throughout my life.

How does He do it? How does He lead our homes toward sanctuary? I can share my journey, but I can't offer a formula for anyone else. Many different kinds of mothers, I'm sure, benefit from many different ways of being led by the Spirit. The Book of Mormon explains that when God communicates with men, He does it "according to their language, unto their understanding" (2 Nephi 31:3). For some He sends inspiration through feelings; for others, guidance through people; and for others, enlightenment through music, art, or dreams. The way He often directs me is through books. They may not be the books others need and may not point in the direction others need to take, but in my case, over several years Heavenly Father put some pivotal authors in my path who helped me recognize my personal mothering weaknesses and repent.

BYU philosophy professor Terry Warner wrote a book, *Bonds That Make Us Free*, which pulled the rug of all my self-justifications out from under my feet. After reading it I knew I had to abandon certain tendencies: my sense of self-pity and martyrdom as a mother at having to actually suffer, work hard, and grow; my sense of anger that everyone in the family didn't always live up to my expectations; my tendency to manipulate husband and children into doing things the way I wanted them done; and my tendency to love with strings attached, rather than loving fully and unconditionally. Former justifications for these and other mindsets seemed neither rational nor righteous after reading this book.

Another BYU educator, Catherine Thomas in the religion department, wrote a book called *Spiritual Lightening*, which infused the doctrines of the Restoration into my understanding of motherhood. Prime among those doctrines: God is the one who is omnipotent--not you, the mother. Your children are here for His purposes and to fulfill the missions He has given them--not to make you, the mother, look good. Your job is to guide, help, suffer, and grow with your children--not to try to remove all suffering from their lives or to control their agency. Other insights from Sister Thomas include the revelation that anxiety over your children is not perceived by them as unconditional love. Also, when you, the mother, improve, the entire family improves spiritually. And this--like a lifeline tossed to discouraged mothers everywhere--it's never too late! With

teenagers, with grown children, with all of our imperfections, it's never too late to let the Atonement work its way into our hearts and create a sanctuary. Remember, you are not omnipotent, but Heavenly Father is.

Another book appeared on my kitchen table: *Mitten Strings for God: Reflections for Mothers in a Hurry* by Katrina Kenison. I almost tossed it aside because it looked too packaged and cute. Instead I opened it and let the author's gentle, comforting, real-life anecdotes enfold me as I drifted into her home's peaceful sanctuary--quiet mornings with sleepy children crawling into Mom and Dad's bed for hugs; summer days spent digging in sandpiles and wading in streams; dinners cooked alongside, one child peeling potatoes and another arranging an awkward centerpiece using twigs and wildflowers; meandering conversations on a porch between mother and child as Mom knits mitten strings. The child pretends to knit, fingering imaginary yarn in the air, after a while declaring, "I'm knitting mitten strings for God." It didn't matter that my bustling household couldn't exactly replicate those scenes; what mattered was the love and serenity behind them.

Books like these, spiritual impressions, and scripture study took my flickering awareness to an overwhelming desire for change. Viewing myself, like King Benjamin's people, in my own carnal state--controlling, humor deficient, and stressed out--I returned once again to an intense study of the Atonement, ready to beg the Lord: "Change me. My heart is broken. We both know I can't do this alone." He gave me hope by helping me feel my family *had* done some things right, especially in focusing our gospel study on a core doctrine found in the Doctrine and Covenants: "This is the gospel, . . . that he came into the world, even Jesus, to be crucified for the world, and to bear the sins of the world" (D&C 76:40-41). Through our family nights, scripture study, and especially in observing Easter, we had tried to "talk of Christ, . . . rejoice in Christ, . . . preach of Christ" (2 Nephi 25:26). And it was through the Savior that the sanctuary in my heart and in our home began to germinate and, month by month, year by year, grow stronger.

But change comes slowly. I always want the Lord to perfect me minutes after the first heartfelt prayer. Instead, as the gospel reference *True to the Faith* well explains, conversion is a process, not an event--a "quiet miracle" that, in my case at least, brings about change over years rather than weeks or even months. And those years are often fraught with setbacks. Just when it seemed peace and sanctuary had reigned in our home for a while, a combination of sick kids, too many science-fair projects, and a teenager's sarcastic comment would send me into a tirade that made someone or even the whole family feel worthless. Then I'd return to my room and pray, mad to be so human. But in my room hangs a picture of Christ in Gethsemane. It helps me remember: "He did this for me. My faith is in Him, not in my limited abilities."

For my part I had to find time for deeper scripture study and prayer, which, in my particular circumstances, translated into sacrificing much of my beloved reading of other things. But I'll have time someday for many activities I yearn for; in the meantime, when I need it most, my breakdowns are gradually becoming the exceptions more than the rule. Several milestones have let me know that the fruits of the Spirit are appearing with greater frequency in our home. Please allow me to share some of them.

First, the fruit of *peace*, marked by a definite drop in temper tantrums. One night I left for a meeting, giving husband and children the usual list: do the dishes, finish all homework, pick up the house. When I got back, of course, the house was still a mess, but somehow

the anger didn't rise. Instead I noticed that at least the dinner dishes were mostly done, a few kids were working on homework, and the baby was in his pajamas. I didn't start "silently" crashing the remaining dinner dishes into the dishwasher or sulk around picking up toys. With genuine cheerfulness, I said, "Okay, let's finish what's been started!" While this may seem insignificant to every other inhabitant on the face of the planet, what a victory for me!

Second, the fruit of *longsuffering*, marked by a sincere feeling of sympathy when my children are goofing up. An interesting phenomenon has started to occur: sometimes when I'm looking at a missing-assignment report, sometimes when a child has just fought with every possible sibling within a half-hour period, I recall quite vividly dumb things I did as a child, adolescent, and even grown-up. I remember the feelings of frustration and discouragement those actions brought on and sense that my children need to know I too falter and must change. Before discussing problems, I often hear myself saying to the guilty party, with true empathy, "You know, I've done worse things than this." Discipline must sometimes take place, but the long-winded lectures replete with their litany of past mistakes are diminishing. They may someday disappear altogether.

Third, the fruit of *temperance*, marked by self-restraint in not overprogramming my family to the breaking point. I have not yet been inspired to drop all music lessons, though it would probably help, and I can't control the number of parent-teacher conferences, Church meetings, and kids' programs coinciding on a given day. But I have felt inspired to scale back what I can and not to get so pessimistic when everything, as usual, can't get done. I've tried to remember Elder Richard D. May's observation that "we may find we have crowded our lives with too many good things and not left sufficient time for weightier matters." A physical component of temperance has also emerged as I feel renewed respect for my body's need for sleep, exercise, and not to run faster than it has strength.

The fruits of *hope* and *faith* have brought on the realization that the Lord wants the success of my family even more than I do. I used to pray with fervor every morning and then, like the old saying goes, work as if everything depended on me--and ultimately as if God didn't exist. Now I find I'm able to maintain faith throughout the day, asking Heavenly Father for help in my heart when I'm supposed to be three places at once or when I feel like exploding after a child rolls her eyes at me. Sometimes I still do explode, but I get over it quicker and don't spend hours ruminating over "the sins which . . . so easily beset me" (2 Nephi 4:18). I wholeheartedly agree with Elder Dallin H. Oaks that, in progressing toward conversion, "our family relationships--even more than our Church callings--are the setting in which the most important part of that development can occur." Thus, hope and faith compel me to believe that the same Savior who empowers people to recover from addictions, from sins of the flesh, from diseases and all powers of evil will surely help me become a better mother.

Finally, that ever-precious fruit of the Spirit, *joy*, has rebounded in my heart and in my home. I realized this one night when the kids were supposed to be getting ready for bed at the end of a long, tiring day. Anxious to get to sleep, I discovered a herd of the younger ones collected in the girls' room. They were jumping and dancing on the bed with music blasting from the CD player. I walked in on their party and suddenly found myself picking up the three-year-old and dancing. Everybody started laughing. We kept dancing. There was a great, great feeling in the room. It reminded me of something I couldn't

pinpoint--until I recognized it. We had become a real-life Church commercial!

In moments like these, the words of Jesus Christ ring true: "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). He will ultimately create sanctuary in our homes if we turn our hearts over to Him. The refuge Jesus Christ creates is not contingent on our disposition, our children's behavior, our family size, or ideal circumstances. My sister has to work full time, and my neighbor's chronic health problems restrict her to mothering flat on her back from the living room couch. Both mothers, with their attitudes of genuine love and acceptance, are examples of sanctuary to me.

The hymn "How Firm a Foundation" describes a promise to everyone "who unto the Savior for refuge have fled": "I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand, . . . upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand" (*Hymns*, no. 85). When we flee to the Lord for refuge, He creates sanctuary not only for our children's sake, not only for our husband's sake, but also for our *own* sake. I bear testimony that Jesus Christ can and will lead us beside the still waters and restore our souls, and I say these things in His name, amen.