

“Be Proud of Who You Are and What You Believe”

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Shortly before the new year, I heard Amanda Dickson on KSL radio pose this question: “If you had to pick one word to sum up 2011 for you, what would it be?” Amanda explained that she was prompted to ask this question, in part, by the story of Merriam-Webster’s chosen Word of the Year. All morning I thought about Amanda’s question, but I also asked myself, “What do I want my word to be for 2012?” In all honesty, my first choice was “sleep.” But my next choice was the word “listen.”

I vowed that instead of being the first to pipe up when I felt something was inaccurate or misinterpreted, I would wait for further information. Rather than greeting my children or my husband on the phone with a barrage of questions or a litany of my plans, I would inquire first about what they were up to. And, particularly when it came to matters concerning the Church, I decided that I would put myself in the shoes of those who are trying to better understand and learn who we are before passing judgment.

Part of the reason for my goal probably came from a recent experience with my good friend and fellow running partner. For several years, three of us have been running before the crack of dawn together.

Usually we have all of the world’s problems solved by 6:00 a.m.; it’s just amazing to me that more politicians—or I should say *any* politicians—have not called us.

Anyway, one morning we were discussing a burning news item, which focused on accusations that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a cult. “How could anyone think this way?” I asked. Tracy, who is not a member of the LDS Church, responded, “Do you really want to know?” For the next several miles, Tracy explained that when we utter certain words and phrases, this is what she hears. She assured Kim and me that she did not believe the Church is a cult, but she also helped us see how our own words can be so misunderstood.

I will always be grateful for the opportunity I had to listen to Tracy that morning. And I wanted more opportunities like this one, where I took the chance to really listen. So with that resolve, it was interesting to receive a few days later a letter from the BYU Women's Conference Committee with an invitation to speak on "Being proud of who you are and what you believe." As I read the description of the assigned topic, stopping on such words as "firm" and "immovable," I wondered how I could possibly juxtapose my new goal of "listening" with this "bold" declaration I had been asked to speak upon.

I was particularly drawn, however, to the questions: "How can we be firm and immovable in the wake of peer pressure and yet avoid self-righteousness?" "What are ways that we can be a 'voice for the gospel?'"

President Hinckley counseled us: "There is sCao great a need for civility and mutual respect among those of differing beliefs and philosophies. We must not be partisans of any doctrine of ethnic superiority. We live in a world of diversity. We can and must be respectful toward those with whose teachings we may not agree" ("This is the Work of the Master," *Ensign*, May 1995).

Micheal Flaherty, who founded Walden Media and has produced such blockbuster, family-friendly films as *Charlotte's Webb*, *Holes* and the *Chronicles of Narnia* series, recently told the *Deseret News* that he "doesn't view faith as a mechanism for separating people along denominational lines, but rather sees it as an inclusive force that can unify via common beliefs." In other words, he said, "We need a motley crew to change the world" ("Values-based filmmaker Micheal Flaherty takes the road less traveled," *Deseret News*, Nov. 19, 2011).

Each one of us, whether we live in American Fork, Utah, like me, or in Massachusetts, like Jane, has the opportunity to be a part of what Flaherty called a "motley crew." We live in a world of diversity and differing beliefs. We live in a world where neighbors, coworkers and family members come together for the greater good of our communities every single day—despite our differences.

A few months into preparing for today, Jane and I both discovered that we were going through the same internal struggle. Recognizing the counsel President Hinckley has given to us, we wrestled with our prescribed title. Finally, I realized that I was adding words to this title and description. Nowhere did it say, "Aggressively and obnoxiously be proud of who you are!" Likewise, it didn't say, "Be so firm and unbending that you never consider others' opinions or thoughts or needs. Just drown out their voices with your own!"

Through prayer and study, I also came to the conclusion that perhaps wrestling with the need to be courageous and bold with the need to be humble and understanding is a necessary part of our own development in becoming a voice for the gospel.

For my own sake in attempting to organize my thoughts, I have categorized this process of giving voice to our beliefs into what I have termed "the four 'S's": Seep through, Salute the Savior's teachings and example, Speak up, and Slide on.

Since January, my niece has been studying at the BYU Jerusalem Center. Her parents have been kind enough to copy me in on her e-mails home. In February, Emilie shared with us a personal challenge she has given herself. Quoting a motto of one her professors, Emilie wrote: “What do you know and how do you know it?” The meaning behind that is that sometimes in the Church we focus so much on the application of doctrine that we lose the doctrine. Tradition and other cultural aspects take over true principles. This question, “What do you know and how do you know it?” is to teach us to look for the real motivations behind why we do things so that we can have a strong foundation.

Emilie goes one to say, “It’s made me want to ‘be ... an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity’” (1 Timothy 4:12), like so many of these good people are, whether they are LDS or not. I hope to leave here being fully immersed in what I know and how I know it, so that it seeps through me entirely and I do things because it is the Lord’s will and not because it’s “what everyone else does” back at home.

I have had the good fortune of living close to Emilie her entire life, and I can tell you that everything she has learned in Primary, Sunday School, Young Women, seminary and at BYU seeps through her.

As President Hinckley admonished, our lives “must become the meaningful expression of our faith” and “the symbol of our worship” (“The Symbol of Our Faith,” *Ensign*, April 2005). To me it seems that if the goodness of the gospel does not seep through us, yet we boastfully put on the armor of righteousness, we are nothing more than hypocrites. But when we put on that armor and the metal of that breastplate reflects what is in our hearts, we have created a protective casing that cannot be penetrated by false accusations and lies, no matter how unfair or hurtful they may be. The beauty of this armor is that it prevents us from overreacting to every little jab that comes our way. We are able to stand with confidence and love and patience and share “what we know and how we know it.”

Does this mean that we need to be perfect before sharing the gospel? Absolutely not. Emilie’s dad could probably tell you that my dear niece has a few flaws. Yet a sincere desire to have our outer countenance reflect the righteous desires—and I would capitalize DESIRES here—of our heart is exactly what Paul counseled when he said, “Be ... an example of the believers.”

The believers, as we know, are the followers of Christ—those who’ve willingly, with much sacrifice, put aside old views, thoughts and customs and opened their minds and hearts to a new and greater appreciation of what it means to love our neighbors. This wasn’t easy for Christ’s disciples, even those closest to him, and it’s certainly not something that is without challenge for us today. Having a father in the Army, I learned early on what it meant to salute a higher-ranking officer. A salute meant you acknowledged that officer, you respected that officer, and you would follow him or her into battle.

When we sing the Primary song, “Love One Another,” do we fully accept and agree to follow the divine principle the Savior teaches in John 13?

Elder Quentin L. Cook has explained that in emphasizing love and unity, the Savior was not simply “teaching a . . . [lesson] in ethical behavior.” Speaking of the Savior’s charge to his disciples at the Last Supper to love one another, Elder Cook says, “This was the Son of God pleading with His Apostles and all disciples who would come after them to remember and follow this most central of His teachings.”

“As we listen to the messages of this conference,” Elder Cook said at the April 2010 General Conference, “we will be touched in our hearts and make resolutions and commitments to do better. But on Monday morning we will return to work, school, neighborhoods, and to a world that in many cases is in turmoil. Many in this world are afraid and angry with one another. While we understand these feelings, we need to be civil in our discourse and respectful in our interactions. This is especially true when we disagree. . . . If we show love and respect even in adverse circumstances, we become more like Christ” (“We Follow Jesus Christ,” *Ensign*, May 2010).

It is also important to remember that when we seek to live as Christ did, and as He taught, we will be blessed with the gift of discernment. If anyone had this gift, it was Esther of the Old Testament.

Just recently some very dear friends gave me this beautiful picture of Esther. I thought I knew Esther. For me, she represents all that a spokesperson should be as one who willingly “stands up and speaks out.” Yet Esther, upon hearing of Haman’s request to authorize a royal decree to annihilate the Jews, did not go storming off into the King’s quarters—nor did she shrug her shoulders and say, “But what can I do? After all, the King’s already banished one wife.”

Esther literally followed Elder Ballard’s advice to “engage without being defensive.” In her case, engaging meant talking over what we assume was a delicious meal—a tactic that has worked for more than one woman. I always thought that when Esther asked the Jews to fast and pray with her that it was simply for strength and courage; I now believe that Esther was also praying for discernment, to determine when the right moment would occur to tell the king of Haman’s plan. Perhaps this is why she held her tongue until the second feast.

At times, however, we don’t always have the luxury of a second feast. As Elder Ballard has counseled us, “If we want to be respected today for who we are, then we need to act confidently—secure in the knowledge of who we are and what we stand for, and not as if we have to apologize for our beliefs”—something Esther certainly exemplified.

In my job at BYU, I have found that there are instances when we have a very small window to correct a misperception or an outright falsehood. Like you, I have had the

opportunity to talk with people who rather rudely criticize and condemn our faith. In these instances, I always pray for discernment.

Many years ago at the end of a very long week, I will never forget picking up the phone to have a reporter with a large, national paper immediately launch into a diatribe against our BYU students. Let me assure you that most reporters do not represent themselves this way and work hard to be objective and fair. But perhaps he had a long week as well. (The angel on my shoulder tells me to say that.)

Anyway, he went on and on about the fact that he didn't believe BYU was a real university and that our students were simply sheep. It was at that point, I had enough. I can tell you that before this call I had never raised my voice with a reporter. And I wasn't screaming, but you could have clearly heard me from across or down the hall. I remember telling this reporter, "Don't you dare call our students sheep. These students come to BYU from all 50 states and from 120 countries. They are often the only members of the LDS Church in their high schools. They know what it's like to go to a party and get up and leave—completely alone—because alcohol or illegal drugs are being passed around. Does this sound like a group of sheep to you?"

He didn't answer my question. What he said was, "Are you on the record with all of this?"

"You bet I am," I said.

I then hung up the phone and walked out into the hall outside my office. I remember looking up and down, thinking, "Boy, it's been nice working here." Yet in my heart, I knew I had said what needed to be said.

Interestingly, the next day that article came out, and it was written in what you would call perfect inverted-pyramid style, with "just the facts, ma'am." He didn't include his own opinions, nor did he include mine; he stuck with the facts that bore well for BYU.

Fortunately, such moments are rare. And usually in responding to questions from our friends, our colleagues, people we have just met, or even family members, we are not facing a pressing deadline. It is in these cases that I have always found it helpful to slide on the shoes of the other person.

William Eggington who is a professor in the BYU Department of Linguistics and English Language, gave a BYU devotional this fall where he talked about the "age of proximity" that we now live in. In this new age, he said, we spend more and more time with people from "other families, other tribes and villages, and other cities, regions, and nations. ... This situation often threatens to take us out of our same-language and same-cultural comfort zones."

Have you ever tried to explain a green-Jello joke to someone who has no ties to Utah? They just don't get it. It's not their fault, however. And they're certainly not being rude if

they don't laugh. Yet sometimes others may view us as self-righteous simply because of the words we have chosen to use. Relationship expert Matt Townsend sat down with Michelle King on *Mormon Times* this past December and shared some ways that we can better communicate the principles of the gospel. With the permission of KSL, let me share with you some of his counsel:

[video]

On Matt's note of letting things happen, particularly once we have put the four S's in place (our testimony Seeps through us, we Salute the Savior and His teachings, we are not afraid to Speak up, and we Slide on the shoes of others), let me conclude with one final piece of counsel I received as a young mother.

In picking up my son and daughter from preschool each day, we always looked for an adventure on the way home. One summer we were really lucky as just a few blocks off our route a beautiful home was being built on a hillside. We would go by this home every single day and study the progress that was being made. Curtis and Lynne especially loved to watch the big trucks going on and off the property. Finally, on the day the front gates were installed and the house appeared to be finished, I told Curtis and Lynne that we needed to find a new adventure. "But when do we get to go inside the house?" Lynne asked. Completely shocked, I explained to her that I didn't know these people and that we wouldn't be able to go inside. Without missing a beat, she replied, "Well, Mom, just make friends with them. Then we'll be invited inside."

Of all the ways I know to be a voice for the gospel, they begin with this simple, childlike faith that we can reach across doorsteps, cubicles and borders to make new friends. Almost every day I am reminded that the Church is in a special moment right now, where people worldwide are asking, "Who are you?" Doors that I never thought possible are opening, often because of the work of members who live as Emilie, Esther and Lynne; who explain "who we are and what we believe" by their example, their courage and their absolute Christlike love; who are, as Elder Ballard says, "honest, open, forthright, engaging, respectful of others' views, and completely nondefensive [of their] own" ("Sharing the Gospel with Confidence," *Ensign*, July 2010).

It is my hope—for me and for you—that we never let an opportunity pass to be "invited inside." That we heed Paul's counsel to "... receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God" (Romans 15:7). And I say these things in the name of Thy Son, Jesus Christ, amen.