

“Be Not Afraid, but Speak”

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Several years ago I chuckled at the results of a survey of American attitudes toward certain professions. “How would you feel,” the question was worded, “if a doctor, lawyer, banker, policeman, accountant, mechanic, etcetera, moved in next door?”

The survey revealed that respondents placed television news reporters way down at the bottom of the list—in a dead heat with attorneys! I hope that my days in TV news are far enough behind me that I’ll be welcomed as your neighbor today as we spend some time together in the Marriott Center.

Although I refer to this survey with humor, the questions it poses really are worth thinking about. What if we turn the tables and make *you* the new neighbor? Is it possible that your neighbors could hold a grudge simply because you’re a teacher, a doctor, a stay-at-home mom, or even a news reporter? Maybe your neighbors don’t really care much about your profession, but they do care about your religious beliefs.

Which makes me wonder what the results of *this* survey might be: “How would you feel if a Mormon moved in next door?” Some possible responses:

- 1) “Delighted! Mormons really know how to treat their neighbors.”
- 2) “Indifferent. And it’s funny you should ask. I found out last week that my neighbors of 15 years are Mormons. I had no idea!”
- 3) “Fired up! I plan to march right over there so I can enlighten them. Do you realize how stifling their religion is?”
- 4) “Mortified! Mormons are among the least charitable people I know.”

Today I wish to tackle these fictional, but not unrealistic, responses.

How do we stand tall and speak up for who we are as Latter-day Saints? How can we be firm and immovable in the wake of peer pressure and yet avoid self-righteousness?

How do we stand tall and speak up? In particular, how can we become immovable in the wake of peer pressure and yet avoid self-righteousness?

Before we get started, let's quickly take a look at what people know about us. Pollster Gary Lawrence conducted a nationwide survey of American adults and learned that 98% have heard of our faith. But their knowledge about us as a people and as a church ranged from accurate to appalling, mostly because more than half of Americans reported that they do not personally know an active member of the Church.

Simply being a Mormon sets each of us up for a certain amount of judgment. I'm certain most people in this audience are not labeled by their neighbors as the "least charitable person" they know. But do your neighbors know you're a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? Do you live your life in such a way that they can see that you are at least a little different from the world at large?

And what do you do if they express their pity—quite mistakenly, of course—that you belong to “a church that sees women as second class” and “restricts so many of your freedoms”—comments a former neighbor once made to me.

It can be difficult to stand up and proclaim the truth, especially if you're in the minority, viewed as “old-fashioned,” even “close-minded.” Sometimes, it's easier to live “in camouflage,” as Elder Quentin R. Cook put it, not letting people know who we are or what we believe.

This is, of course, just exactly what Satan would have us do.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland put it quite bluntly when he said, “Satan cannot directly take a life. That is one of the many things he cannot do. But apparently his effort to stop the work will be reasonably well served if he can just bind the tongue of the faithful ... I ask for a stronger and more devoted voice, a voice not only against evil ... but a voice for good, a voice for the gospel, a voice for God” (“We Are All Enlisted,” *Ensign*, November 2011).

Why is it so hard? And how do we do it?

To borrow the words from a well-known Primary song, we “Follow the Prophet.” Listen to what President Thomas S. Monson called a “simple yet far-reaching formula”: “Fill your minds with truth. Fill your hearts with love. Fill your lives with service” (“Choose You This Day,” *Ensign*, November 2004).

Fill Your Minds with Truth

The best place I know to find the truth is in the scriptures, which are full of stories about people just like you and me who quickly—and perhaps with a bit of feigned humility—say, “Oh, I can’t do that. No, not me.” When what they’re really thinking is, “I’m scared to death to stand up and speak!”

Consider the Old Testament story of Gideon. The Lord called Gideon to deliver the children of Israel from bondage after seven years of captivity. “Go in ... thy might,” He says. “Thou shalt save Israel ... Have I not sent thee?” Clearly, the Lord sees something special in Gideon. But what is Gideon’s response? “My family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least of my father’s house” (Judges 6:14–15).

Sound familiar? “Me? A voice for God? Really? I’m just an average, churchgoing, doing-the-best-I-can, but-nobody-of-real-importance, person.” Right? Well, Gideon thought he too was weak and incapable. But God saw Gideon as valiant and inspiring—a man who had filled his heart with truth, and with a little prodding, expounded that truth and liberated the Lord’s people from bondage.

My husband and I recently met a radiant young woman who had filled her mind with truth that empowered her with confidence. She was a soon-to-be graduate of BYU–Idaho, on a stage waiting to speak about her plans for the future. She was petite, with curly blonde hair, and before she spoke, I thought to myself, “Boy, that girl is ‘lit from within’!” When her turn came, she talked about discovering her potential. Then with a huge smile, she quietly but very clearly said: “I want you to know I’m learning many things here. But most importantly, I’ve learned to be a ‘disciple of Christ.’” That woman was so clearly unashamed of her faith, of her devotion to seek out the truth, that you could feel it.

Each of us can gain that same confidence by filling our minds with truth. Because in order to proclaim the truth, we must first have it emblazoned on our minds and in our hearts. And then, as Paul was taught, “Be not afraid, but speak” (Acts 18:9). Be not afraid, but speak.

Elder M. Russell Ballard cautioned that “many misunderstandings and false information about the Church are somewhat our own fault for not clearly explaining who we are and what we believe” (“Faith, Family, Facts, and Fruits,” *Ensign*, November 2007). If each of us in this room were able to overcome our fears and clearly and knowledgeably explain “who we are and what we believe,” can you imagine the impact?

Many have been willing to give their lives to stand for truth. Another example from the Old Testament: Remember the infamous king Nebuchadnezzar. He erected a glorious and massive golden idol and placed it in the middle of town with instructions for everyone in the land to gather and bow before his idol. “The princes, the governors, and captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces” are present, the scriptures say. And they are commanded when “ye hear the sound of the

cornet, flute . . . and all kinds of musick . . . fall down and worship the golden image that . . . the king hath set up. And whoso falleth not down and worshippeth shall . . . be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace” (Daniel 3:3–6).

So, the music starts, and on cue, the crowd indeed falls to its knees. Everyone falls . . . *except* three men: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They alone stand tall. In a fit of rage, the King has these three men thrown into the fiery furnace. Clearly, a terrifying outcome!

Fortunately, these days, there is little to no chance that we’ll be asked to stand in front of a massive, golden idol and bow down or be cast into the flames. But there are other idols, unseen or merely symbolic, to which the music plays and everyone around you starts to change their posture.

These idols appear in the form of political correctness, peer pressure, the promise of worldly success, astounding new technologies, and the list goes on and on—as could our fears, if we believe that standing tall means we’ll be stranded in a sea of bowing enemies, waiting to throw us into the flames. But we cannot and must not be afraid to stand alone. We have made a covenant, as did the people of Alma, to “stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places” (Mosiah 18:8). That means even when it gets a tad bit uncomfortable.

I recently had an opportunity to make a public choice: Do I sit silently, “in camouflage,” as others define an issue or a conversation? Or do I stand up for my beliefs, defend my values and articulate a position that’s not only in the minority, but unappreciated and even “politically incorrect”?

It happened in a meeting with some smart, influential decision-makers. At one point the conversation turned to fostering “diversity” at this particular institution. What started as a discussion about being more inclusive quickly spiraled into a somewhat frenzied attempt to insure that different pet groups and projects received more than an equal share of attention. The comments seemed to completely throw out diversity of faith and culture in favor of more popular, modern expressions of diversity. And frankly, I wasn’t prepared for some of the comments that followed. I sat in my seat, thinking very carefully about what I was going to do, how I might articulate my position forcefully and clearly, yet thoughtfully and with respect. Finally, I raised my hand to respond. I was measured, somewhat clumsy at times, to be sure—I could feel myself shaking inside. But I managed to insert a few remarks about our family’s faith, about the importance of including people of all faith—if we’re really seeking “true diversity.” I went home feeling a little shaken but glad I hadn’t sat there in silence. And to be perfectly honest with you, I wondered if I would I be “labeled” or even ostracized from this group.

Then the e-mails came. One read: “Your comment in the meeting on the many shades of diversity was more than welcome to my ears.” Another woman wrote that this particular issue was “often twisted to a large degree. Thanks for bringing it to the forefront and so tactfully. Can I sit by you next time?”

Even though I felt like the lone voice in that meeting, it turns out I was not alone. Those who said nothing, but felt just like I did, were validated, given a voice. And I have a sense that they'll feel empowered next time to speak up themselves.

Fill Your Hearts with Love

I learned another important lesson that day. *What* we say is important. *How* we say it is critical. We will have greater success and increased acceptance and understanding of our message if our hearts are full of love and respect for others.

President Gordon B. Hinckley said, "The true gospel of Jesus Christ [has] never led to bigotry. It never led to self-righteousness. It never led to arrogance. The true gospel of Jesus Christ leads to brotherhood, to friendship, to appreciation of others, to respect and kindness and love" ("The BYU Experience," BYU devotional address, Nov. 4, 1997).

The Savior Himself said, "Love one another; as I have loved you" (John 13:34). There are no exceptions, no conditions, or waivers in that commandment. If we want to make a difference, we must truly love our neighbors, open up to them, let them see into our world. As you do this, I promise that you will be surprised at how many common allies you find. We're not alone in trying to change the world for good.

I recently sat on a panel at Tufts University in Boston. And there were three of us on the stage: a Jewish woman, a Muslim woman, and me—a Mormon woman. We had been asked to talk about our faith and how it defines us as women. There were many interesting discussion points centered on our religious doctrines and how the world sometimes views them—and us—as unusual, even peculiar. As the conversation deepened, I found it fascinating that the three of us had so much in common—not doctrinally, but by the mere fact that the strength of our beliefs had led each of us to goodness. Imagine what could be accomplished in the world if we were to pull together in friendship and truly work with like-minded people who are *not* of our faith but who stand for right!

Elder M. Russell Ballard reminds us of the Savior's teachings, "that we are all neighbors and that we should love, esteem, respect, and serve one another despite our deepest differences—including religious, political, and cultural differences. . . . Of all people on this earth," he said, "we should be the most loving, the kindest, and the most tolerant because of [our] doctrine" ("Doctrine of Inclusion," *Ensign*, November 2001)

Think about how our lives would improve if our main concern was not who is right but how can I be a friend? How can we find common ground? How do we form friendships outside of our cultural and religious circles?

There are many answers, but the one I like best is that it's always wise to start out small.

I'll never forget the advice of an astute visiting teacher. I was bemoaning the endless task of cleaning a house left in chaos by little children. "Start in a corner," she said. Start in a corner.

Sisters, take a little corner of your world and try it. Try first reaching out to those on your street, or in your office, or at the park. As you develop new and real friendships, barriers will fall. You won't feel the need to put on any camouflage. You will share your faith as freely as any other part of your heart.

In 1999, Elder Marlin K. Jensen said, "Consider the power of each ... of us, 10 million strong, of our own free will and choice reaching out to those not ... of our faith in unconditional friendship" ("Friendship: A Gospel Principle," *Ensign*, May 1999).

Yes, imagine the power! Unconditional friendship. Speaking truth without sounding self-righteous. Being tactful and considerate of others' feelings. As Paul taught the Corinthians, it's better to speak five words that teach than 10,000 in an unknown tongue that may dazzle, but not edify.

Fill Your Life with Service

Sometimes—many times, in fact—we need not say anything at all, because our *actions* will speak most loudly.

A wonderful and very effective bishop in one of the wards in my stake famously challenged his congregation to "Live the gospel in your community, not just in your home and in your private life."

Our ward mission leader envisions every member of the congregation incorporating a nonmember in their church calling. He tells of a sacrament meeting "bread coordinator" who asked her nonmember neighbor to teach her how to bake bread for her congregation every week. That sister then branched out and found other neighbors who taught her to make different kinds of bread for Sunday worship. And they all had a new appreciation of that holy ordinance after many accepted invitations to church.

I also love the story of women in Irvine, California, who are helping their children to be proud of who they are and what they believe—by serving. Quite literally serving lunch! It's famously called "Mormon Lunch." About every week, these moms whip up a buffet for up to 60 teenagers! A feast of taco soup, chicken nuggets, lasagna—whatever it is, lots of it! About a third of the teenagers who come are LDS. Two-thirds are not. The only rule? The first five kids through the door have to organize a blessing on the food. It's consistently the nonmember kids who arrive first and sometimes stumble through a prayer, but happily oblige. Dessert are the famous "Sweet Treats" in a basket by the door—a little yummy something that has a scripture attached and a thought about a gospel principle that the kids are studying in seminary.

Speaking of seminary, attendance at “Invite a Friend Day” has increased fourfold because of Mormon Lunch. And many of the nonmember kids now want to go to Church dances. “I didn’t know Mormons were allowed to dance!” one of the girls proclaimed to her friends at lunch. She and some of the other girls even went online to find out LDS dress standards to make sure that they were appropriately prepared.

Kym Henderson helps carry on the tradition of Mormon Lunch with some other moms. She told me, “We can see how it emboldens our kids. They’re now less intimidated to speak up about what they believe. Those kids are in our homes. They feel of our goodness. Bottom line, our kids don’t have to hide who they are.”

Conclusion: The Power of Truth, Love, and Service

Sisters, none of us have to hide who we are! Will it take some work to throw off the camouflage and move out into the open? Absolutely! But we can do it. Truth. Love. Service. There is no other combination that reaps such rewards. And what are the rewards? I propose that among them is a little change in the results of that hypothetical survey I referred to earlier: “How would you feel if a Mormon moved in next door?” “Well, I’d be thrilled. The Mormons I know are strong and immovable in their faith. But they are also loving, kind, respectful and ever-willing to make a positive difference in their community.”

Sister, let’s throw off our camouflage. Let’s live our lives in a way that we can courageously speak out for truth and righteousness with humility and respect—communicating the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He lives. He loves us. This I know for sure and will be forever proud to declare it. In His holy name, amen.