

Anchors in the Sea of Family Life

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Good evening, sisters.

The Women's Conference has been a highlight for me for many years. My husband has always liked me to go because I come home feeling uplifted and rejuvenated about the gospel and life in general. I feel scared to death that my role has been reversed. I liked it a whole lot better in the audience, so don't lull yourselves into a false sense of security. If I can be here, it could be you next year.

I hope and pray that I may say something that will be relevant, real, and hopefully helpful.

We've been asked to speak on the spiritual anchors in our lives and how we need them to ground us in a world of turmoil and stress. We've given a lot of thought to this subject and realize that many different things ground us. In our short time we can only hope to touch on a few. Forgive me for being autobiographical, but that's where my experience lies.

The traditions we create in our homes become anchors. They are what keep life interesting. How boring if every day is just like the preceding one. It's the little things you do in your family that make it unique and interesting. So much of life is routine; don't be afraid to add your own spin on it.

We are creating traditions whether we want to or not. Things we do repeatedly become traditions. Even being boring can be a tradition. Let's think of traditions as the frosting on the cake. Traditions might well be one of the small things by which great things come to pass.

I once heard of a study done on convicts. They were trying to determine any common threads in their backgrounds. One of the findings was that their homes had basically been devoid of traditions, particularly the constructive ones.

I'm convinced that an ordinary, perhaps ho-hum home and an exciting, spiritually

uplifting home aren't significantly different. The former just lacks the essential small things.

A tradition that has become an anchor in our home is what goes on at our kitchen table. It's a wooden trestle table with benches on both sides and a chair at each end. It's been in use for over twenty years and shows the effects of eight children. Eating dinner together as a family is a very important part of our family life.

Twenty-three years ago when we built our home, my conservative mother strongly suggested that we not put a bar in our kitchen. I disagreed because I thought a bar would be convenient and cute. She pushed the matter by saying she didn't want my kitchen to become a short-order, fast-food kitchen! She made me promise that if we put one in, that we would still sit down together as a family and have dinner. I thought she was being a little old-fashioned, but she made her point. "Have dinner with your family."

I don't know of any scripture that tells families to eat together, but after being raised in a home where that happened and being a parent in a home where I try to make it happen, I know that it's a good thing for families to do.

I like to cook, which helps, but we are busy people with busy children, and time is always the challenge. It does take some planning to make it all happen, but it also doesn't have to be a gourmet feast every night. Sometimes on busy nights it's grilled cheese and soup. And we've even had Pizza Hut help us out on occasion. But the key is—we eat together. We turn off the TV, the music; and if the phone rings, it goes on the answering machine. We sit in our places, and everyone has a certain spot. If someone isn't there, he or she is missed. We bless the food, and then we eat and talk and eat and talk; and talking is just as important as eating. I don't know how families stay close without a table. It's where everything from current events to personal traumas and even manners is brought to life. And then there are dishes to do—which we assign as a rotating blessing. Then someone feeds the cat and dog, and someone sweeps the floor. At that point, everyone goes his or her merry way. It isn't a big deal, but we have connected as a family.

I think it's sad that we can live in the same house and yet live parallel lives. I know of a couple who while attending counseling sessions to save their marriage were advised to buy a wonderful dining room table and to use it. This is the closest I can come to scientific evidence to support my point.

We did put in a bar, and sometimes we use it; but, eating together as a family is the rule, not the exception. Does it take a little more work? Yes. Does it take a little more time? Yes. Is it worth it? Many times over.

My sister Jane once did some volunteer work in a home for troubled youth. She found that the teenage boy she had been working with was having a birthday on the day of her next visit. She stopped at a local bakery, had his name put on a cake, and topped it with candles. "Happy Birthday" was sung, and the cake was shared with everyone there. What she considered a simple gesture of fun and goodwill touched this young man very deeply. He admitted having only one other birthday cake in his whole life. I couldn't help wondering

why his own parents hadn't brought it to him. Where were their traditions?

A tradition can be as easy as pancakes on Saturday morning, and if it's St. Patrick's Day, they ought to be green and look like a shamrock; or Mickey Mouse, or somebody's initial. Many of our family traditions are based around holidays and extended family on both sides. We have a piñata on New Year's, an Easter egg hunt with the cousins, a family reunion at Lake Powell every summer, Christmas stockings with our names on them, shopping and lunch with Grandma Jensen on our birthdays, planting a garden in the spring, weeding in the summer, picking raspberries, caramel corn at Grandma's on Halloween, riding in our hometown parade on the 4th of July—either on a decorated bike or a family float. The parade route is unique; it goes around the park twice, in case you miss something the first time. Our list goes on and on, and so does yours.

I have often thought that car trips have brought our family together, whether we are going camping, or to St. George, or Jackson, or wherever. Getting there is part of the fun. You are probably thinking that I have a huge tolerance for pain, but I think car trips create forced togetherness, and in this busy world, it's hard to come by.

In the car we play the alphabet game, eat treats, sing songs, and listen to music. Even our treats have become predictable. I don't think we have been on a road trip in the past twenty-five years without apples and a paring knife, red licorice, and squirty cheese with Triscuits. The creative possibilities with this last treat are endless. We make designs with the cheese, spell names and initials of family members and significant others, make triple and even quadruple deckers. We carry on until the cheese squirts no more. Squirty cheese at home has little appeal. I must admit I find it rather gross, but in the car, it has a life of its own. We are barely pulling out of the driveway when Marlin says, "Break out the treats!"

I think time spent in a car can be good family time. We live in the country, and so there is a little drive time connected to almost every lesson or appointment. Through the years, that one-on-one conversation counts as uninterrupted quality time that I treasure. Cell phones and in-car TVs have started to invade that space. Please don't let them—we can turn them off, you know!

Reading has been a tradition in our family. Reading to someone allows you both to share a common story line and also creates a closeness. We have found nap time for preschoolers and bedtime for older children are prime time. I'm convinced that along with gospel stories and scriptures, children should be exposed to the fabulous world of children's literature. No child should grow up not knowing the nursery rhymes, Curious George, Dr. Seuss, Richard Scarry, *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*—the list is endless.

I have a husband who shares this love of books and has read to the children as well. He loves adventure books, and so do they. It helped so much at night if he was there to take either the older or the younger children. Then we each read. We are almost to the point of just older children. I'll be sad when no one wants a bedtime story.

I have fond memories of reading *The Secret Garden* to our children when they were

in grade school. We were in one of the girl's rooms, and our sons, Matt and Ryan, had chosen not to come in because we were reading a girl's book. We would read several chapters each night and were getting to the good part when one of the boys yelled out, "Louder, please!" I knew they were into it as much as we were and that *The Secret Garden* was not gender specific.

My memories of being read to as a child are very warm and pleasant. I hope our children have similar feelings. I must admit I am very touched when I see our son and his wife reading to their young daughters. They are making their traditions.

I'd like to read a quotation that I have loved forever:

You may have tangible wealth untold;
Caskets of jewels and coffers of gold.
Richer than I you can never be—
I had a Mother who read to me.

(Strickland Gillilan, "The Reading Mother," *The Best Loved Poems of the American People*, sel. Hazel Felleman [Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Books, 1936])

I have a friend who reads novels to the family on car trips. They went to Colorado over Easter, and she said they laughed all the way to Denver reading *The Education of Littletree*.

A tradition we have had a hard time establishing is reading the scriptures as a family. Our goal is to meet every night at 8:30, read scriptures and have family prayer. I think family prayer is the perfect way to end a day—and we all agree that we feel good when we read the scriptures. But in reality, we fall very short. Marlin always says that our family specializes in 1 Nephi. I can't begin to tell you how many times we have regrouped, started over, and tried again. It all sounds so easy on paper, but in reality, we are not home, or someone is usually sick or grumpy, or you name it. I think Satan tries very hard to sabotage our good efforts. We do keep on trying, however, and as President Gordon B. Hinckley said, "Do the best you can." I do think it is a great anchor to read the scriptures together.

When I asked Kate, our seventeen-year-old, what she thought anchored our family, she said, "I know you won't believe this, Mom, but I think family prayer does." I was surprised because half the time when it's time to pray, Kate is on the phone. We wait and wait in the family room, and by the time she gets there, she's the only one in the mood to pray.

We are all so human; prayer and scripture reading sound easy, but they take a lot of effort, like every other good thing.

The subject of family home evening has been dealt with by many before me, so I want only to touch lightly on it. I value its merits deeply. Family home evening has been a

tradition in our home for more than two decades. We've had fun ones, terrible ones, indoor ones, outdoor ones, long ones, short ones, mad ones, organized ones, and disorganized ones. Our lessons have always been fairly short, with games and songs to extend it. On any given Monday evening we would wonder if there was any good coming out of home evening, but the cumulative effect of years and years of ten-minute lessons is quite remarkable. We need to hang in there.

Sometimes the traditions we've started make me tired. This last February I felt myself wearying a little bit. In the past, we've always given a little valentine present to each family member. They would find their name attached to the end of a string and then follow their string through the dining room, den, living room, bedrooms, etc., until they found their valentine. This February 14th I was tired and announced that we would just hand them their valentine with a great big kiss (no strings attached)! With four of our children married and our last child almost nine, I told Marlin that perhaps this tradition could be put to rest. Allison, thirteen, and Sarah Jane, nine, were totally sad that I would wear out while they are still in their prime! They jumped into action and had the whole house completely strung within a few minutes. Shortly after we had finished our chase, our oldest son, Matt, popped in with our two darling granddaughters. We had a little valentine for them, and Matt said, "Mom, don't just give it to them; where are the strings?" So the strings have been brought back by popular demand. Traditions do have power.

A rule that has become a tradition has to do with movies. Some years ago our family decided not to go see any R-rated movies. Knowing that each of our children has made a personal decision is an anchor for all of our family.

Sometimes I wonder about the value of green pancakes, and egg hunts, and squirry cheese. I'm convinced that we can grow up without such things. However, if we believe that the family is preeminent, then we should be doing everything we can to spiritually anchor our family.

Creating anchors for our family can be done. It doesn't really take a lot of money. It doesn't really take a lot of creative genius. It does take time, and it does take a strong desire to make it all happen.

We can create wonderful anchors even if we live alone. I grew up in a single-parent home, and I know firsthand that a loving mother is capable of creating a spiritual, loving, and intact home. The biggest drawback as a single mom is the lack of time. Although the time problem is universal, it hits single and working moms the hardest.

In *The Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck points out that love is work. Love is a verb, an action word.

If we love our family enough, we will be willing to pray with our family, read with our family, cook for our family, spend our time with our family, and do whatever it takes to anchor them. Effort and desire are the main ingredients in making things happen for our

family.

I'm convinced that great families don't just grow up under the course of least resistance. They are works of art. Luckily we have some wonderful help in shaping them—the Holy Ghost. He is always our first line of defense. If we don't get a confirmation of what we're doing, then we must change our course. We are human, and we can change bad patterns. Don't let them become the traditions that we pass on.

Marlin recently ran into an old childhood friend. The conversation quickly turned into why they liked their growing-up years so well. His friend said he had thought about it a lot and had decided it was because "we had everything money couldn't buy."

Money gives us a quick thrill, and I have to admit I like it. But buying things such as a new house or car doesn't fix a broken heart. Money can't fix people. If money could fix the scars of a neglected childhood—the birthday cakes not baked, the love not given, stories not read—we would go into debt to make ourselves whole and well. If we have deficiencies from our past, which everyone does, let's not pass on the pain—let's break the cycle for the sake of the next generation. Let's love our families enough to give them everything money can't buy.

While our family was serving a mission in Rochester, New York, in 1994, my mother became ill and died. My sisters took care of the distribution of her estate and the sale of her home. Upon returning to Utah at the end of our mission, one of the first things I wanted to do was "go home" to my childhood home. Our daughters felt the same, so we headed to Clearfield. Everything seemed so familiar, even turning up 100 North as I had done a thousand times before. As we approached the house, there was a strange car in the driveway, my favorite tree had been cut down, there were no begonias in the flower boxes, and the roses were gone. I thought to myself, "How dare they! Ownership shouldn't give one that kind of license!" We all had a sick feeling in our stomachs. Grandma's house wasn't Grandma's house. We slowed down but didn't even stop. It wasn't home.

It only took a few minutes to realize that the warm feelings I have about home are still there, even though "home" had drastically changed. They have nothing to do with the structure and yard but are all wrapped up in the people—Mom and Dad and my brother and sisters, great neighbors and our ward family—and all the wonderful traditions we had in our home. And I can go to these anchors anytime I need to—my memories are there!

My only hope is that we are doing that for our children and that you are doing it for yours. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.