

Pertaining to Partnerships: What it Really Takes

“What Have We Learned? What Ought We to Have Learned” General Conference

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Stephanie Snuffer

Stephanie Snuffer: Hi, everybody. Okay, let's see... I really can't see.

Unknown: Stephanie, could you move the Kleenex box?

SS: Oh, I meant to do that first thing because Reed showed me what the image looks like on the camera. It's funny. All you guys watching at home—Wah!!—it's like a hugely glowing Kleenex box on the front. Okay, awesome.

Okay, I don't usually do this, but I do want to thank Mark and Carolyn and everybody else, I mean, who's done all of this work. I can't imagine. And never in a million and a half years would I volunteer for something like this. So, thank you. I do appreciate it. Okay, so I'm...

[Audience applause] Yes. Please give them all another round of applause. Also, quick question, and Mark or Carolyn or anybody who knows: When am I...? When are we ending? What's the deal here? [Inaudible response] There is no end time? Good Lord Almighty, you guys! Okay. Bring me... [Inaudible response] Two o'clock. Is my phone down there? Denver, bring me my phone. I need up my time. Okay.

Alright, so I'm gonna talk more practically speaking, right? So the tenth parable is this really wonderful story about, you know, some really great aspirational things. And if you're married or if you have children or if you have parents or if you have friends, you know that all of these wonderful things in the Scriptures are great, except there's no how; there's no, like, there's no HOW to do it. It's just “seek for this, work towards this...” (Thank you so much) “...strive for this,” and I'm... We're gonna leave you without any skills or any real knowledge or understanding on how to do it. So while I am so grateful for the talks that I heard... We got here yesterday, so I heard Jeff do the fellowship talk, and Leroy and Dan, and then Q this morning. I really want to give a huge shout-out and nod specifically to Leroy and Q for bringing in all of this other information that is so important to understand the “how we do things,” and what's going on inside and in your mind and with your emotions, and how you're sort of interpreting and seeing the world, because that's the practical application of this stuff.

So there are several domain... Okay, first of all, anything that life depends on has to be put through what is called destructive testing. I'm gonna say that again: Anything that life depends on has to be put through destructive testing. Okay? So all of your structural metals have to be destroyed to figure out their strength, their ability to keep planes together, right? Concrete has to be destroyed in its created form in order to determine its strength, because if these things fail, then lives are put in jeopardy. So I want you to keep in mind this idea of destructive testing: Anything life depends on has to be put through destructive testing.

Alright, so we have... There are several domains of health in a relationship that will need attention, and everybody will go through different stages. Your... You'll need to focus on

certain things, and sometimes in your life... You know, if you've got kids, it's about family. If you're just a married couple, it's about each other. So nobody's experience is gonna look the same. Everybody's experiences will look different at different times in life. You'll have commonalities, obviously, but everybody will have different experiences. I have to tell Q, the... When... You told me that 15-year thing a long time ago, and I... Honestly, I've used it a lot, so I really appreciate it, because it is such an important message—and not to pick on Q and Rob—but it is such an important message for people to know that this is the hardest work you will ever do in your life is to be in a relationship with someone that you are, like, looking for eternity with, and this includes families, okay? So coincidentally to these domains that you're gonna have to go through and these periods of your marriages and relationships that you're gonna have to struggle through, God has offered us promised potentialities conditioned upon the lives we live and the way we behave in our relationships. We are given promises that are actually conditional. We have to rise to the occasion, so to speak. And the parable that Denver spoke of is one such offering. So the question then is, are we willing to be tested—destructively tested—to see what we can offer, what we've got.

All of our relationships/all of our marriages have the attention of Heaven. They're watching us. They're checking to see how we're doing, what effort are we putting in, where are we succeeding, where are we failing? They're... ~~Our poster...~~ Our ancestors, those who have gone before us, our Heavenly Parents, they're rooting for our success! And so, they're watching. And they want to see what effort and energy and work we will put into these relationships to preserve them into eternity. And might I add that eternity is a long, long, long time. I can't, I mean... And so, if your first 15 years were hell, that's like a week, okay? There's no... You get to do this for a really long time. And honestly, I think that's a wonderful, wonderful message that I get to do this for a really long time. I have a long time to be on this path of progression in my relationship. It's not meant to be easy. It is meant to be challenging. It is meant to be refining. It is meant to be edifying. It's meant to be unsettling. It's meant to be scary. It is meant to be glorious.

And everybody struggles. All marriages, all relationships, all families have different seasons of difficulty. Some will have more than others. And so if you believe that you are the only person you know who struggles in your relationships with your children or your spouse or your parents, I am really sorry that you feel that way, because you need more people in your life who are willing to admit/who are willing to talk even a little bit about the struggles that they are going through. Because if you are surrounding yourself with people who are lying to you about their relationships, about how good they are all the time, you need a little bit of balance—because it's not true, and I have absolutely no doubt about that at all; none. And we do a real disservice to ourselves and to each other when we are not willing to discreetly and appropriately share some of our struggles. And so if you think you're protecting yourself or your family, you know... I think it's important to be discreet. I think it's important not to tell tales that aren't yours to tell, but I think it is incredibly important that we are honest with...

One of the things my children said as they got older and got married (and I don't know if I've ever told you this), but a couple of them said the greatest disservice we ever gave/that

we ever showed our kids (one of them in our relationship) is they never saw us fight, which means they never saw us make up—which does not mean we never fought; it just means we did it behind closed doors. So everybody's gonna have a different experience. But I thought that was really interesting because, as adults going into their own relationships, the one thing they all said they wished we had done was be more open about our arguments and more open about our repairs. So you're not protecting anybody by keeping this all hidden. Nobody is being protected by this.

Okay. ~~It is easy and without challenge or sacrifice.~~ Oh, IF it's easy and without challenge or sacrifice, then we forfeit the right to be heirs of the promises that we are seeking. If it's easy and if we're not sacrificing (which Q just addressed beautifully), then we forfeit the right to become heirs. So in that thought, consider this scripture, or consider this lecture on faith, which has been brought up multiple times, starting way back in the Sawtooths:

It is...vain for persons to fancy...themselves that they are heirs with those, or can be heirs with them, who have offered their all in sacrifice, and by this means obtained faith in God and favor with him so as to obtain eternal life, unless they in like manner offer unto him the same sacrifice, and [though] that offering obtain the knowledge that they are accepted of him. (LoF 6:8)

I don't see any reason why that scripture cannot be applied to the aspiration of an eternal marriage, one like unto our Heavenly Parents who, by the way, have done exactly what we are doing now. That is what the progression is about. It's to start here (or wherever) and progress so that we, one day, can be like Them—and we have to do that down here in this mess, encumbered by a million different ungodly characteristics and traits, which include things like:

- Defensiveness,
- Criticism of self and others,
- Stonewalling (which means you shut down and won't engage in conversation to reconcile or to repair),
- Avoidance,
- Contempt,
- Projection,

Projection—for those of you who don't know what it is—is to defend our ego; it is to blame someone else for something that you don't want to recognize in yourself. So for example, if my boss comes to me and says, "Hey, I need you to put together a program for this group that we're gonna run, and I need it done by, you know, December 1," and I think, "Oh, my gosh, I can't..." you know, so then I'm mad at him for putting this on me because he shouldn't have been so insensitive. He should have known how I don't have time for that. He should have asked someone else. But what I'm really saying is, "I'm afraid." "I don't think I'm competent." "I don't know." "I'm insecure about this whole thing." So I take my insecurities and my fears and I make them someone else's fault. That's projection.

- Co-dependency,
- Enmeshment.

Enmeshment is when we have extreme closeness that constrains autonomy and blurs emotional boundaries between individuals in a relationship.

Co-dependent relationships (I'm gonna go out on a limb and say) are pretty much the norm, and that's not necessarily a good thing. And so these are the kinds of things that breed in our relationships: resentments, disconnection, anger, hopelessness, and isolation. So the more we utilize these characteristics of co-dependency, personalization, criticism, contempt, and fear, the less connected we feel with our spouses and our children.

Correspondingly, there are a lot of really great characteristics and traits that we could make better use of, and they're harder to access. And if you want to know why they're harder to access, just read Q's talk or listen to Leroy's talk. They're harder to access because we are conditioned a totally different way. And I think those are great talks that illustrated exactly why and how we are conditioned that way. Some of it is partly the conditioning, trauma—those kinds of things—but it's also ignorance. We just don't know! We actually just don't know how to do anything different, or we have a lack of emotional regulation, or we don't have the capacity to rise above our basest reactions. But the ones we're looking for are:

- Empathy,
- Compassion towards yourself and towards others,
- Validation,
- Good boundaries,
- Differentiation (which is the opposite of enmeshment),
- Communication,
- Vulnerability, and
- Self-awareness.

Those characteristics, utilized in relationships, bring connection, closeness, camaraderie, cooperation, love. And these... Neither of these lists are exhaustive. You can just find these come up for you all the time in different ways, and there's plenty of different words for them.

So what we're trying to figure out is, What are we doing well? What do we need to work on? And what are the effects of any of these things in our relationships? And how do we figure all of this out? Well, we could certainly study and read. We could look to the Scriptures to see what we could do or what the Scriptures say about marriages.

So, this is from the New York conference. So, Denver and I did 3 out of the 10 things that we were gonna do when we were in New York—3 of the 10 topics we were gonna talk about. This is one of them we didn't get to because we only, yeah, because we only got to three. This one is "Caretaking Marriages." And so, this is using scriptures to show where and what the Scriptures say about relationships.

So I'm not gonna read the scriptures to you. I'm just gonna say in Ephesians 5:25, it mandates that husbands love their wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it. So, you know, that's a pretty high standard: Love your wives the way Christ loves the church.

Love and respect: In Ephesians 5:33, it talks about the principle of love by respecting one another. Couples establish a framework for emotional and psychological support when we have mutual respect.

Proverbs 31 talks about the virtuous woman's role, which transcends her domestic duties, encompassing emotional and intellectual support for her husband.

In the Book of Mormon, Jacob 2:18 (I just Googled this, so this is just the traditional [versification]) advises men to seek the welfare of their wives and children before their own desires, reinforcing this caretaking role.

In Mosiah 18:21, it speaks of hearts being knit together in unity and love, which is a wonderful context to view marriage in. Caretaking fosters an environment of peace and harmony.

And then... Okay, so those are pretty much the scriptural ones that just came up. And I think those are good. But again, we're talking about aspirational things without any real clear understanding of HOW these things work. And I think there's a bit lacking in the scriptural record, and the reason I think that is because:

I know nothing about *Abinadi's wife*. I don't even know if Abinadi had a wife, but I assume he did. And I have absolutely no idea what Abinadi's wife thought about him going off on these missions, so to speak, and then having no communication with him, not being able to know where he is. I can just imagine her sort of calming her children, saying, "Daddy will be home soon, kids. Daddy will be home soon." Well, eventually Daddy didn't come home. Okay? I don't think that is insignificant. But yet, we know nothing.

Lehi and Sariah. Like, all I know is that Sariah murmured. Well, I don't know what in the world went on behind the scenes of Sariah murmuring or the difficulty they had with their kids—because they have Nephi and Sam, and then they have Laman and Lemuel! There is nothing in that record that gives us any indication about what those relationships were like. And yet, they were relationships, and so they were tricky and difficult and contentious and wonderful and connecting and beautiful and companionable. And I'm sure they fight over the... I'm sure Lehi and Sariah fought over those kids, one defending them, saying, "Oh, it's not so bad. They didn't kill him this time!" Right? This is not... This is real, okay?

Abigail and the "churlish man." What is a churlish man? And how long did Abigail have to deal with it? I don't know. I'm assuming there's churlish men out here. I don't know. I don't even know what that means. But we know nothing about that. That is not insignificant.

And then we have *Adam and Eve*, for crying out loud. You cannot have children who commit fratricide and not have marital conflict! And it's not because one causes the other, it's because... You can't talk about these things; you can't have these experiences without it impacting the system of the family. And we know nothing! That frustrates me—truly. We know nothing about this.

Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother; that's where it starts. ~~Satan~~ Lucifer and Christ; one chooses the complete opposite. There is very little information in the Scriptures—other

than this aspirational stuff about how we're supposed to be—that tells us how we are. Like, my... I meet with a lot of clients who have an LDS background (either they are, or they have a background), and when they're coming in with their troubles and their difficulties and their, you know, their woes about their parenting and how bad they are and how difficult it is, all I have to do is start at the beginning. It went off the rails relationally at the beginning with Christ and Lucifer—and then Cain and Abel, and then Laman and Lemuel and Nephi.

We don't have the information in the Scriptures that help us figure out ~~what~~ how to do what we are supposed to do. We don't see arguments; we don't see... Well, this is not true—but we don't see a LOT of arguments, and so we don't see a lot of repair. We don't see a lot of conflict repair. We see a lot of conflict, but we don't see a lot of repair, which goes to what Q was talking about. We see disappointment, and we see satisfaction. We see disagreements, and we see agreements. We see companionship and support, but we're not given a broad range of understanding how to do this. So interpersonal competency in relationships and families and marriages is critical. So where do we go, right?

So I gave you what I could find in the Scriptures. Now, it was not an exhaustive search, so feel free to continue to search the Scriptures for these relational issues of charity and love and kindness and hope and all of those things, because they are there, and that is a wonderful place to start. But we have also been given enormous amounts of information that can be taken from other places; books, articles, classes, online resources, podcasts, therapy are all wonderful resources to figure out how to do these things. These are resources that are supplements to the Scriptures, and they are a blessing to us and, if chosen wisely, okay...? I mean, you have to be careful with what resources you are choosing, but I trust all of you have some spirit of discernment and can figure out whether it's going to bring you closer to your spouse and, therefore, your goals of eternal families or not. You're not idiots. You can figure this out. You don't have to ignore everything, and you don't have to take in everything. But this information is given to us and, I believe, comprise part of the mysteries of God. I might be the only person who believes that, and that's okay with me, but I do believe that, and this is why:

What is more mysterious than learning how to become gods and goddesses, priests and priestesses, kings and queens? Because if you've got that answer off the top of your head, please share. But I think it's pretty mysterious—when you take into consideration all the makeup of the human being, the nervous system, the cognitions, the behavior, the emotions, the offline, the online—it's pretty much a mystery unless you have some resources. So I believe we should all be taking advantage of good resources that encourage strengthening our marriage bonds and having this goal in mind of attaining unto this promise—this blessing that could be promised to us—of eternal marriages.

Alright! So I have another way. This is probably the harder way of figuring out this information, and that is to ask. Ask your wife, ask your husband, ask your children, ask your parents: What can you do? Where are you struggling? What do you need? And then shut your mouth, and listen. Just stay present and quiet and capable of listening to what the responses are. Okay? So here are a few things you can ask. (Oh, I want to throw in a quote here really quick.) Norman Vincent...

Oh, first of all, this is just a coincidence, because yesterday morning, as I did my Insight Timer meditation (Denver reminded me that we have to do our meditation), the quote on the Insight Timer was, “The trouble with most of us is that we would rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism.” So, with that in mind, prepare yourself. Here are a few things you can ask:

- Do I take responsibility for how I respond to things and people, or do I try and change the things and people to make me feel better so that I don’t have to take responsibility?
- What are my defenses?
- When do my... (Is it “cackles”? When do my cackles go up? Hackles? Give me a letter. Is it a C, H? Thank you.) When do my hackles go up? Thank you. When do my “crackles” go up?! Alright. (I’m not old enough for that phrase. I don’t even know what that phrase means.

[Spilling her soda] Ooh, oh, my Diet Coke! It’s spilling on the stage. Sorry, my apologies.

- Okay, when am I most defensive?
- Am I willing to learn new things... Oh, hold on. Am I willing to learn new things as a spouse or a parent? Okay, this means if your child comes to you and says, “I don’t like the way you did that,” what’s your reaction? What are you capable of? Are you capable of listening to them tell you why they didn’t like the way you did that? Or do you think that you are the parent, and therefore, it does not matter that they... You don’t like the way they did that—because either one is absolutely possible and falls 100% within the norm. If your spouse comes to you and says, “This exchange we had three weeks ago is actually still on my mind, and it hurt me, and I would like to tell you why,” are you willing to learn new things as a parent or a spouse?

These are questions you can ask people:

- Do I validate you and accept your emotions and feelings as your experience, even if I don’t agree?

~~Validation is the single most important thing you can do.~~ Look, validation is ONE of the single most important things you can do in a relationship, and very many people just don’t even understand the concept, okay? Validation does not mean you agree. Validation means you believe that the person who is telling you their experience actually had it. And if, for some reason, you think you know that they didn’t have that experience and so you can tell them that they didn’t, or dismiss them because you don’t think they did, then (pardon my French) you’re an idiot—because you do not get to impose your view of someone else’s experience on them, and if you’re unsure of that, invite that into YOUR life. Make sure you ask the people you love to tell you that you are wrong about your experience and tell me how you feel about that because you’re going to feel pretty crappy about it.

- Am I controlling? If so, how?
- In what ways or circumstances am I most reactive?—meaning, instead of responding with some kind of emotionally regulated state. In what areas or aspects of our

relationship or our life together, do I flip my lid? Do I get angry? Do I respond poorly?

- How do I deal with challenges in our relationship? Gosh, can you imagine what it'd be like to have someone tell you how well you do in some areas? That would be awesome.
- Do you see me as judgmental?
- How do I show you that I am aware of your needs?
- How do I respond to criticism or feedback?

Wow, that's a hard one. I was talking to my daughter the other day, and she... I—bless her soul—I don't know where this came from, because I don't think it came from me. She said, "Taking criticism from her boyfriend is intuitive," like, she feels like just keeping her mouth shut and letting it, you know, letting him get it out is intuitive. She knows in her core that that is the way for him to process through his frustrations or anger. And I just... My hat is off to her because that is so hard.

- How do I show I am willing to learn from you and take your influence?

So, in couples therapy, there's this theory that if partner... I mean, I don't know, there's—I'm not going to give any percentages or anything—but there's this idea that partnerships/marriages should be able to take influence from each other, and there's generally an imbalance in that, where one partner is more resistant to the influence of the other. I don't know that it's... It might be gender specific, but I don't know that for sure. But are you willing to take influence from your spouse—or even from your children? Again, parents, what would that be like to take influence from your children instead of believe, for some reason, that you are the authority? Can you take influence from other people?

- Am I able to express my needs appropriately?
- How do I support you in following your dreams and goals?

Do you guys know what your spouse's dreams and goals are? Do you know if there's some un-lived life experience that someone you care about wants to pursue? I don't know, maybe you do, maybe you don't. But it wouldn't surprise me if you don't, because that's not surprising.

- In what ways do I make it easy for you to express yourself, emotions, frustrations, or experiences with me?
- Am I enjoyable to be around? Why or why not?

There are times in our lives when we are not enjoyable to be around. It might be trouble at work. It might be a difficult parenting period. It could be chronic illness or something, and we may be particularly negative. We may be particularly sensitive to things. I think there's reason to believe that there are times in your life when you are not pleasant to be around. Me, too.

- ~~How do I make your life more comfortable~~ or how do I make your life comfortable? What needs of yours do I meet? What could I do more?

This is just a list off the top of my head. There are dozens of questions like this you could ask and dozens of different ways to answer them. Some of them were yes or no questions with a, you know, with a how or a why. Others were more open-ended questions. Some of them were framed in the negative, and some of them were framed in the positive. You can do it any way you want to—right?—whatever you have capacity or tolerance for. You could also spend months doing this. You could take turns; you could ask each other. You can set ground rules. I would highly, highly recommend setting ground rules. If this is something you're willing to engage in, set the ground rules about how you're willing to do it. Maybe one question a month; maybe one question a week; maybe every other week, whatever. Maybe you have a specific date night out where you do it over a dinner, where this is what you do. Maybe you write these things out. Maybe you have a written communication where you express these things to each other. You take breaks. You self-soothe. You compartmentalize, so that if something is unresolved but it's been opened up, you put it on a shelf so that you can go out to dinner or a movie and enjoy one another's company. Have fun with this.

Most marriages are made up of two people who chose each other! I don't know, any arranged marriages here? There might be, I don't know. (Brandon, are you raising your hand? Were you arranged...? Were you an arranged marriage? I cannot believe I did not know that. Oh, my gosh. Crazy.) You chose each other. Okay, that is a pretty important thing to remember when things get unpleasant, right? I chose this person. Remember why you chose that person. Okay? You can also process any of this in therapy, right? You've got a therapist; you can start this at home, and then you can work on it in therapy. That's a good way to use this process.

Okay, so I would like to bring another scripture into this, because I've just asked you to engage in some learning that is outside of the Scriptures, right? I mean, it's in addition to the Scriptures but outside of it; it's reading, it's podcasts, it's asking questions and listening to the answers. So in the context of that, I would like to read the scripture Moroni 10:2,

Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall read [or hear] these things, if it be wisdom in God that ye should read [or hear] them, that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive these things ["these things" meaning, How can I make my marriage better? How can I be a better parent?], and ponder it [or them] in your hearts. And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God the Eternal Father in the name of Christ, if these things are not true [Am I really like this? Is he right? What lack I yet? How can I be better? Help me hold space for this]. And if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, ...he will manifest the truth of it unto you by the power of the holy ghost. And by the power of the holy ghost, ye may know the truth of all things [these things].
(Moroni 10:2 RE)

What are you good at? What are you not so good at? What do your kids need from you? Can they ask you for it?

Anything that life depends on must be exposed to destructive testing. Vaccinations... The reason we have vaccinations, whether you like them or not, is because you are exposed to the actual contagion. The NTSB's entire purpose is to destroy every car we drive so that when a human body gets in that car, we know that life can depend on it. Anything that life depends on must be exposed to destructive testing.

I know of nothing more important or life-dependent than our relationships. And if you have not felt the destruction—the strength testing of your relationship—I think... I can't even paraphrase what Leroy said, but you need to stop shadowboxing, and you need to fight head-on because anything that life depends on must be exposed to destructive testing.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.