

A Conversation with Single Adults

Gordon B. Hinckley, *Ensign*, March 1997

My beloved brethren and sisters, it is a wonderful privilege to be here with you tonight. As you can well imagine, I have the opportunity to speak to many kinds of groups, but there is no group to whom I would rather speak at this time than you. You have come for answers to your concerns and your problems. You have many of them. You want assurance, you want help. I pray for the direction of the Holy Spirit that I may say some things which will be helpful to you.

You are a diverse group. I understand that all of you are over 30. In a sense that is the only thing you have in common, other than your membership in the Lord's Church.

Some of you have never married. Some of you have been married and been divorced, some with children and some without. Many of you are struggling to support your children. You have come to know that it is a harsh and cruel world out there. You long for help. You need help.

Others of you are widows or widowers for whom loneliness is an unrelenting and constant experience.

Though you are so diverse in your backgrounds, we have put a badge on you as if you were all alike. That badge reads S-I-N-G-L-E-S. I do not like that. I do not like to categorize people. We are all individuals living together, hopefully with respect for one another, notwithstanding some of our personal situations.

I assure you that I feel at home with you because you are all Latter-day Saints. In your hearts you know that God lives and that Jesus is the Christ and that this Church is the creation of the Almighty and the Savior whose name it bears. I know that you pray, and that is a wonderful thing. Sometimes you pray to the Lord with great earnestness for help, for companionship, for relief from your struggles. You wonder why your prayers are not answered as you would like them to be.

We have all had that experience. But we come to know as the years pass that our Father in Heaven does hear our prayers. His wisdom is greater than ours, and we come to know that He answers our prayers even though the answers at times are difficult to discern.

My heart reaches out in love to each of you. I think that in some measure, at least, I know something of your problems and your desires. You reply: "You have never been through what we go through, and so you really do not know anything about it."

There is a measure of truth in that, but I hope you will not deny the feelings of my heart for you. I do not sympathize with you because I know you do not want pity. Rather, in a spirit of love and of understanding I simply talk with you in a dialogue.

All of you presumably are without marriage partners. Many of you wish you were married. You think this would be the answer to all your problems. While a happy marriage should be the goal of every normal Latter-day Saint, let me assure you that for many who are married, life is miserable and filled with fears and anxiety. The most burdensome responsibility I have is to make judgments on applications for cancellation of temple sealings following civil divorce. Each case is considered on its individual merits. I pray for wisdom, for the direction of the Lord in dealing with sacred covenants made in the most hallowed surroundings and of an eternal nature.

The circumstances behind the divorce and behind the request for cancellation of a temple sealing contain a litany of selfishness, of greed, of behavior at times even sadistic in its nature, of abuse and heartache and tragedy.

I say that only to remind you that there are those who are married whose lives are extremely unhappy, and that you who are single and experience much of deep and consuming worry are not alone in your feelings.

When I spoke on this subject once before, I received a number of letters. I get letters all the time. I read from one that I had on that occasion:

“For more than 20 years I have endured a lack of sensitivity of members of the Church with respect to my single state. As I have pursued my profession, I have moved to various areas of the country. In seeking participation in local Church activities, I have encountered a variety of levels of welcome and acceptance, ranging from a warm, friendly welcome to a very cool indifference and an air of discomfort that seems to stem from their lack of knowing what to do with me. In one ward I felt strongly that the members would prefer that I not attend. This continued for nearly six months, and I finally sensed a passive acceptance, as though I were a nuisance that wouldn’t go away, and so, must be tolerated.”

If that be the case, it is a tragedy. It represents a betrayal of the spirit that should be found in all of our congregations. Men and women such as you have great talents and can add immeasurably to the quality of the teaching and leadership in almost any ward in the Church. It is a general Church responsibility to remind bishops and other Church officers to give each member a warm welcome and to make use of his or her talents.

For when all is said and done, we should not be classified as married or single but as members of the Church, each worthy of the same attention, the same care, the same opportunities to be of service.

We are all individuals, men and women, sons and daughters of God, not a mass of “look-alikes” or “do-alikes.” All of us are very much alike in our capacity to think, to reason, to be miserable, if you please; in our need to be happy, to love and be loved. We are subject to the same pains, the same sensitivities, the same emotions.

Never forget that there is something of divinity in each of you. You are a son or daughter of God, and you have a wonderful inheritance. I hope you will never belittle or demean yourself.

On an occasion similar to this I told of an experience I once had. One evening when my wife was at something which women call “a shower” and I was home alone, I put on a record, turned down the lights, and listened to Beethoven’s Concerto for the Violin. As I sat there in the semidarkness, I marveled that such a thing could come of the mind of a man, a man who, in most respects, was as I am. I do not know how tall he was or how broad he was or how much hair he had, but I guess he looked very much like the rest of us. He became hungry, he felt pain, he had most of the problems we have and maybe some we do not have. But out of the genius of that inspired mind came the creation of a masterpiece which has entertained the world through all of these many years.

I marvel at the miracle of the human mind and body. Have you ever contemplated the wonders of yourself, the eyes with which you see, the ears with which you hear, the voice with which you speak? No camera ever built can compare with the human eye. No method of communication ever devised can compare with the voice and the ear. No pump ever built will run as long or as efficiently as the human heart. No computer or other creation of science can equal the human brain. What a remarkable thing you are. You can think by day and dream by night. You can speak and hear and smell. Look at your finger. The most skillful attempt to reproduce it mechanically has resulted in only a crude approximation. The next time you use your finger, watch it, look at it, and sense the wonder of it.

You are a child of God, His crowning creation. After He had formed the earth, separated the darkness from the light, divided the waters, created the plant and animal kingdoms—after all this He created man and then woman. I repeat, I hope you will never demean or belittle yourselves. Some of you may think you are not attractive, that you have no talents. Stop wandering around in the wasteland of self-pity. The greatest missionary the world has known, the Apostle Paul, is said to have been short, have a large Roman nose, rounded shoulders, and a whining voice, all of which may not sound too attractive to some persons. Abraham Lincoln, America's greatest hero, was tragically homely. But from his great heart and mind came words such as few other men have spoken.

I hope you will not indulge in put-downs, in pessimism, in self-recrimination. Never make fun at the expense of another. Look for virtue in the lives of all with whom you associate.

When I was much younger there was a popular song which said, "Accentuate the positive." Attitude has more to do with personality, with attractiveness, with getting along with others than does any other attribute. The scripture states that "as [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 23:7).

To you single women and men who wish to be married I say this, *Do not give up hope. And do not give up trying. But do give up being obsessed with it.* The chances are that if you forget about it and become anxiously engaged in other activities, the prospects will brighten immeasurably.

I repeat some words from the newspaper column "Dear Abby":

"The key to being popular with both sexes is: Be kind. Be honest. Be tactful. If you can't be beautiful (or handsome), be well-groomed, tastefully attired, conscious of your posture, and *keep a smile on your face.*

"Be clean in body and mind. If you're not a 'brain,' try harder. If you're not a great athlete, be a good sport. Try to be a standout in something. If you can't dance or sing, learn to play an instrument.

"Think for yourself, but respect the rules. Be generous with kind words and affectionate gestures, but save the heavy artillery. ... You'll be glad you did" (reprinted in Chicago Tribune, 17 March 1991, 6).

I wish every woman might be married to a good man, one worthy of her association and her companionship, a breadwinner who looks after her needs and the needs of those who come to that home, her protector, her strength, a companion who loves and cherishes her. I would hope that every man might have the eternal companionship of a woman who loves him, who comforts and encourages him, who reads and thinks, who understands and cultivates his strengths as well as her own, one with whom he can share his innermost thoughts, one with whom he can walk side by side on the high road that leads to immortality and eternal life. Unfortunately it does not always work out that way. So frequently it does not.

Marriage requires a high degree of tolerance, and some of us need to cultivate that attribute. I have enjoyed these words of Jenkins Lloyd Jones, which I clipped from the newspaper some years ago. Said he:

"There seems to be a superstition among many thousands of our young [men and women] who hold hands and smooch in the drive-ins that marriage is a cottage surrounded by perpetual hollyhocks to which a perpetually young and handsome husband comes home to a perpetually young and [beautiful] wife. When the hollyhocks wither and boredom and bills appear the divorce courts are jammed. ...

"Anyone who imagines that bliss [in marriage] is normal is going to waste a lot of time running around shouting that he has been robbed.

“[The fact is] most putts don’t drop. Most beef is tough. Most children grow up to be just people. Most successful marriages require a high degree of mutual toleration. Most jobs are more often dull than otherwise. . . .

“Life is like an old-time rail journey—delays, sidetracks, smoke, dust, cinders and jolts, interspersed only occasionally by beautiful vistas and thrilling bursts of speed.

“The trick is to thank the Lord for letting you have the ride” (“Big Rock Candy Mountains,” *Deseret News*, 12 June 1973, A4).

Let us face the fact that in this life some of you will marry, some of you may not. For those of you who do, it must be a total commitment, without reservation. It must involve total and unequivocal loyalty. It must be a covenant for eternity, a companionship that will require constant attention and nurturing.

For those who do not marry, this fact of life must be faced squarely. But continuous single status is not without opportunity, challenge, or generous recompense.

I believe that for most of us the best medicine for loneliness is work and service in behalf of others. I do not minimize your problems, but I do not hesitate to say that there are many others whose problems are more serious than yours. Reach out to serve them, to help them, to encourage them. There are so many boys and girls who fail in school for want of a little personal attention and encouragement. There are so many elderly people who live in misery and loneliness and fear for whom a simple conversation would bring a measure of hope and brightness.

Lose yourself in the service of others. As Jesus said, “Whosoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life . . . shall find it” (Matt. 16:25). If you are fed up with your life, if you feel an oppressive loneliness, if you feel you are of no worth, go out and look up somebody who is in worse condition than you are—and you will find very many of them. Read to the blind, read to the aged, help those in distress, comfort those who are in sorrow. Give a little of your substance to those who are in need. Share and the world will become a sweeter, more delightful place for you. “Look to God and live” (Alma 37:47). There is so much to be done that can be wonderfully rewarding.

There came to my desk recently a bulletin issued by the Utah Boys Ranch. It included the story of a boy named Mike. A judge of the juvenile court wrote concerning him:

“Mike, at the age of 9 years, was sleeping in cars, associating with gangs and involving himself with dangerous weapons. No state agency could help this young boy turn his life around. The Utah Boys Ranch stepped forward and offered their help. The Boys Ranch saved his life. They gave him a place to live and taught him values and standards. His environment and world changed and now he is out of the Juvenile Justice system.”

Included also was a letter from Mike himself which reads:

“Hi. This is Mike. I had a bad childhood where I grew up. I was in a gang that was bad. I came to this place. I’m glad that I came to this place ‘cause if I didn’t come here I would still be in gangs and getting in trouble. I was so glad that I came here ‘cause I met some good people like Chris and Delpha. But now I have a family and I am doing good” (Utah Boys Ranch, *New Beginnings Round-up*, fall 1996, 1).

There are so many who have been injured and who need a good Samaritan to bind up their wounds and help them on their way. A small kindness can bring a great blessing to someone in distress and a sweet feeling to the one who befriends him.

Another thing to remember: there is a great potential within each of us to go on learning. Regardless of our age, unless there be serious illness, we can read, study, drink in the writings of wonderful men and women. As Dr. Joshua Liebman once observed: “The great thing is that as long as we live we have the privilege of growing. We can learn new skills, engage in new kinds of work, devote ourselves to new causes, make new friends. Accepting then the truth that we are capable in some directions and limited in others, that genius is rare, that mediocrity is the portion of most of us, let us remember that we can and must change ourselves. Until the day of our death we can grow. We can tap hidden resources in our makeup.”

We of this Church have been given a marvelous promise by the Lord. Said He: “That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (D&C 50:24).

What a remarkable statement that is. It is one of my favorite verses of scripture. It speaks of growth, of development, of the march that leads toward godhood. It goes hand in hand with these great declarations: “The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth” (D&C 93:36); “If a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come” (D&C 130:19); and, “Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection” (D&C 130:18).

What a profound challenge is found in these marvelous statements. We must go on growing. We must continually learn. It is a divinely given mandate that we go on adding to our knowledge.

We have access to institute of religion classes, extension courses, education weeks, and many other opportunities where, as we study and match our minds with others, we will discover a tremendous reservoir of capacity within ourselves.

It is never too late to learn. I believe this with all my heart. Sister Hinckley and I are growing old. We are in our mid-80s. I am constantly amazed at what a voracious reader she is. She reads two newspapers a day, goes through magazines, is an ardent student of the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants, and I saw her the other evening reading a lengthy biography.

I know of no other practice which will make one more attractive in conversation than to be well-read in a variety of subjects. Said the Lord to you and to me: “Seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith. ... Organize yourselves. ... Cease to be idle” (D&C 88:118–119, 124).

The best books are the scriptures. Said the Lord: “Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me” (John 5:39). Read the Church magazines. There are many other worthwhile things to read. Reading will sharpen your mind. It will clean up your intellect. It will improve your speech to get into the thoughts of the great men and women of the ages, including those of our own age.

But be careful of what you read. Avoid pornography as you would a plague because it is as deadly as a deadly disease. Avoid the foul language, the titillating rubbish of many TV programs, of videotapes, of sensual magazines, of 900-numbers, and the filth that I am told is now found on the Internet. These will bring you no benefit, and they could destroy you.

I mention another matter. There is a growing practice among single men and women of traveling alone together, visiting distant places together. Such a practice is fraught with danger. Recognize that in your circumstances you are extremely vulnerable. You may think you can play with fire and not get burned.

That, I submit, is a dangerous assumption. Be true to the best that is within you. Let your self-discipline be as steel when it comes to compromising circumstances.

To you men I say that you have no right to take undue liberties, that invitations to immoral behavior are unbecoming any man who holds the priesthood of God, that it is imperative that you practice self-discipline and govern your thoughts and rein in your impulses.

To all of you, accept every invitation to serve in the Church. Be true and faithful, be loyal and supportive concerning this glorious work of the Lord. Every one of us is a part of this great cause and kingdom. There is no room for a slacker, a critic, a pessimist, concerning this the work of the Almighty. Teach a class, and you may point a boy or a girl in a direction that will make of him or her a great and good man or woman. Volunteer for projects. And, most importantly, in the quiet moments of your lives, reflect on the goodness of the Lord to you. You were born in a good land and in this great season of the history of the world. You are among the relatively few who have been blessed with a knowledge of the restored gospel, with membership in this Church, with testimony in your hearts concerning the work of the Lord.

Be prayerful. I hope that every one of you gets on your knees every morning and every night and expresses gratitude to the Lord, that you share with Him the righteous desires of your hearts, that you pray for those in need and distress wherever they may be.

To you single mothers and fathers, may I say a special word of appreciation for you. Your burdens are heavy. We know this. Your concerns are deep. There is never enough money. There is never enough time. Do the very best you can and plead with the Lord for His help that your children may grow in grace and understanding and achievement and, most importantly, in faith. If you do so, the day will come when you will get on your knees and, with tears in your eyes, thank the Lord for His blessings upon you.

To you older women and men who are widows and widowers, how precious you are. You have lived long and had much of experience. You have tasted the bitter and the sweet. You have known much of pain and sorrow and loneliness and fear. But you also carry in your hearts a sweet and sublime assurance that God our Father will not fail us in our hour of need. May the years that lie ahead be kind to you. May heaven smile upon you. May you draw comfort and strength from your memories. And may you, with your mature kindness and love, reach out to help those in distress wherever you find them.

Brothers and sisters, look above your trials. Try to forget your own pain as you work to alleviate the pain of others. Mingle together as opportunity affords. It is important that we do so. We need others to talk with and to share our feelings and faith with. Cultivate friends. Begin by being a good friend to others.

Share your burdens with the Lord. He has said to each of us: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

"Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

"For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28–30).

May I suggest that you go to work on your family history. You will become enthralled with it.

Qualify for a temple recommend and live worthy of it at all times and in all circumstances. I would think that every one of you would hold a temple recommend. If you do not, then resolve that you will get your lives in order and become eligible to go to the Lord's house. Go to the temple on a regular schedule. There you may help those who are totally helpless to help themselves. And each time you go you will

leave as a better man or woman than when you entered. The recommend you carry in your wallet or purse will become a reminding safeguard. The vicarious service you do in behalf of others will bring a measure of satisfaction that will come from no other source.

Now, one other matter. There is no place for arrogance or egotism on the part of any of us. The Lord in revelation has said, "Be thou humble; and the Lord thy God shall lead thee by the hand, and give thee answer to thy prayers" (D&C 112:10). I believe that. I hope you do also.

In conclusion, please be assured of our love. Please be assured of our respect, of our confidence in you. Insofar as I have the right to do so, I bless you that if you will walk in faith and righteousness you will know much of happiness, you will have the temporal blessings you need, you will have friends with whom you can share your thoughts and your feelings, and you will experience the love of the Redeemer of the world.