



Elder Gary E. Stevenson

AN UNDERSTANDING HEART

By Elder Robert D. Hales
Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles



Growing up in Cache County, Utah, USA, with the Logan Utah Temple nearby (see opposite page), Gary Stevenson gleaned many lessons from the teachings of his father and mother. His father taught him to follow the Holy Ghost, and his mother motivated him to choose the right. As a teen he learned to appreciate the fellowship and service of his priesthood quorums, part of his preparation to serve today in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

When Gary Stevenson was about 11 years old, his father took him hiking. “I was jumping from rock to rock in front of my father,” he remembers. “I intended to climb a large rock and look down. As I clambered toward the top of the boulder, he grabbed me by my belt and pulled me down.

“‘What’s the matter?’ I said, and he replied, ‘Don’t climb on that rock. Let’s just keep on the trail.’ A moment later as we looked down from higher up the trail, we could see a rattle-snake on top of the rock, basking in the sun.

“‘That’s why I pulled you back,’ my father explained.

“‘Later as we were driving home, I knew he was waiting for me to ask the question: ‘How did you know the snake was there?’ He said, ‘Let me teach you about the Holy Ghost.’ We had an impromptu lesson about the roles the Holy Ghost can have in our lives: protector, comforter, and one who testifies. ‘In this case,’ my father shared, ‘the Holy Ghost was protecting you through me. He warned me to pull you away.’”

This experience, though simple, helped Elder Stevenson to understand that when promptings of the Spirit are received, they



should be accepted and acted upon. It was one of many lessons gleaned from his father.

Marvelous Mother, Marvelous Mentors

According to Elder Stevenson, his mother was an example of pure goodness: “Her expectations motivated me. Almost every action I made was measured against the thought, ‘I do not want to disappoint my mom.’”

Together, his parents reinforced gospel principles during family home evening and other family activities or gatherings. “They anchored our home in the teachings of the gospel. It was the foundation of our lives,” he says.

Other significant mentors also guided him. “I remember in some of my early training as



a General Authority that President Henry B. Eyring, First Counselor in the First Presidency, suggested we make a list of 20 people who had a positive impact on our lives. I think everyone could benefit from such an exercise. It was inspiring to think of all the good men and women who were there to help me, especially in my youth.”

Fortified by Family and Friends

Gary Evan Stevenson was born on August 6, 1955, and raised in Logan, Utah, USA. His parents, Evan and Jean Hall Stevenson, had four children. Gary was the second child and oldest son.

“I had a close association with my brother and sisters. My older sister, Debbie, expected me to do what was right. My younger siblings, Merilee and Doug, expected that I would be an example. We all felt a responsibility to live righteously and participate in Church activities.” His extended family



also held high expectations: “For example, when my oldest cousin left on a mission, he signed a \$2 bill and passed it to the next cousin preparing to serve. That \$2 bill passed through 16 cousins who served missions throughout the world, reminding each one that we were united in serving the Lord.”

Priesthood friends also influenced him for good. “I learned early in life what it means to be associated with a quorum, not only on Sunday but also in the neighborhood and in school,” he says. “It gave me a sense of identity, belonging, brotherhood, and service.” He specifically remembers accompanying a quorum member to collect

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE STEVENSON FAMILY. EXCEPT AS NOTED, LEFT: FLOWERS © TUKKATA/ISTOCK/THINKSTOCK; RIGHT: PHOTOGRAPH OF LOGAN UTAH TEMPLE BY JARVIE DIGITAL



Elder Stevenson served a full-time mission in Japan (below right) and developed a love for Asia and its people. When he returned home, he met his future wife when they attended an institute class together. They married in the Idaho Falls Idaho Temple and became the parents of four sons: Craig, Bryan, Brett, and Kyle. Elder Stevenson's eyes light up when he speaks of his wife, "the sunshine in and of my life."

fast offerings from a sister in the ward who was homebound, blind, and without much income. "Despite her circumstances, she always had a nickel or a dime as a fast offering," he recalls.

A Gift That Requires Work

After graduating from high school and a short time attending Utah State University, Elder Stevenson was called to serve in the Japan Fukuoka Mission. "I felt anxious about learning Japanese. My concern continued to mount in the missionary training center. Yet after about six weeks, fervent prayer and diligent study led me to a sense of peace that the Lord would bless me to learn Japanese, but not without hard work. This taught me that the gift of tongues is like faith and works and other gospel principles.

After you have done all you can do, then you are endowed with the blessing."

Following his mission,

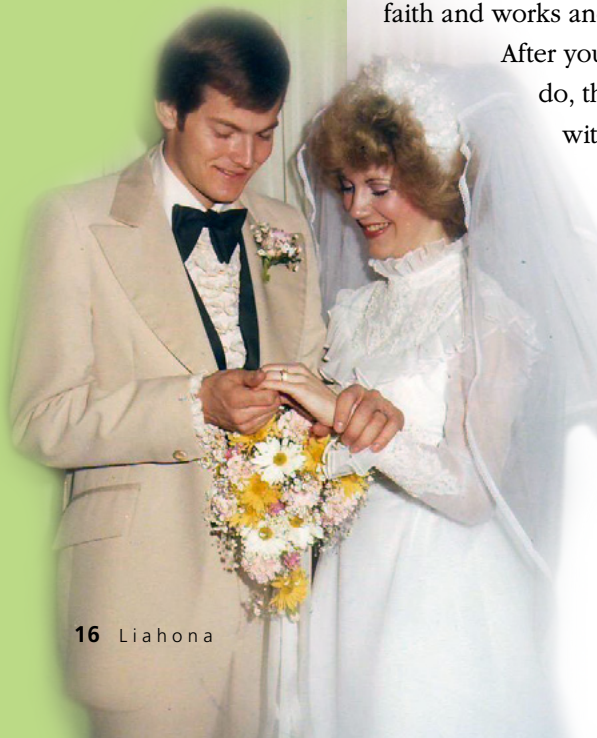
Elder Stevenson developed a passion for Church history, studying the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants, and delving into historical journals and family histories. He took particular interest in Joseph Smith and his family, the Whitmer family, Oliver Cowdery, and Martin Harris. He researched the translation and publication of the various editions of the Book of Mormon.

Once again he learned that faith and hard work go hand in hand. "Every answer to every gospel question does not come immediately," he counsels. "The Lord expects us to read, study, ponder, and pray. And when we do this with faith and a righteous desire, over time a sweet witness will come."

Through the years, he has felt especially blessed when called to teach youth Sunday School, Gospel Doctrine, and Young Men classes. These callings have allowed him to testify of his deep feelings for the truthfulness of the scriptures, a conviction developed from years of study.

Back at Utah State University, Elder Stevenson returned to his studies in business administration and marketing. He spent long hours in the library. "Each time I entered, I was greeted by a sign . . . that read, 'And with all thy getting get understanding' [Proverbs 4:7]." This scripture became engraved on his heart and years later became the theme of a devotional address he gave at Brigham Young University.

"This understanding comes through *an interdependence of study and prayer*," he explained in that address. "As we trust and rely on the Lord, a greater measure of understanding comes from Him into our heart."¹



Institute Romance

During an Old Testament class at the institute of religion, he met Lesa Jean Higley, who had moved from California to Idaho and was now a student at Utah State. “The teacher asked Lesa to role-play as Eve and for me to play the role of Satan to tempt her. As a result, it took a while for me to convince her to go out with me,” he recalls with a smile. They dated for just over a year and then married in the Idaho Falls Idaho Temple in 1979.

Elder Stevenson’s eyes light up when he speaks of Lesa. He refers to her as “the sunshine in and of my life.”² Sister Stevenson graduated with a degree in home economics education, taught school early in their marriage, and was constantly contributing her time and talents to schools, civic and community boards, organizations, and other endeavors. However, Elder Stevenson considers her gifts as a homemaker to be among her most God-given traits: “She has an ability to create a gospel-centered home, a safe and welcoming environment where the Spirit dwells.” This ability, coupled with a deep understanding that true joy comes through serving others, has blessed the lives of her husband, her family, and many around her.

Elder and Sister Stevenson became the parents of four sons. “We have enjoyed everything together through the years,” he says. “The boys played basketball, football, baseball, and tennis. We all share a love for outdoor activities such as four-wheeling, snowmobiling, skiing, snowboarding, and various water sports. Nevertheless, Lesa influenced our sons with a measure of culture as well, developing in them an enjoyment of music and art. And in order to extend the gift of service to others through our family, it was necessary that she engage the ‘horsepower’ of the boys.”

Building a Business

Elder Stevenson’s business career grew out of his love for the people of Asia. When he returned home from his mission, he and two lifelong friends started importing gift accessories from Asia. This evolved into selling fitness products. Over the next three decades, their small business grew



into a successful firm that employed over 2,500 people.

One employee remembers what was in Elder Stevenson’s heart as a businessman: “We were discussing a difficult business decision. I told him we had to make sure to do what was legal. He told me we had to not only do what was legal but that we had to do what was right.”

“Letting good principles absorb you in business is good for business,” Elder Stevenson states. “Integrity, hard work, compassion, treating people with respect—and at the same time requiring accountability—are not precepts you talk about and practice only on Sundays. They are to be practiced every day of the week.”

As the business grew, so did demands on his time: “I was a young bishop with young children and also making multiple trips to Asia each year. My father approached me and said, ‘I observe that when you are with your family, you are not really *with* them. I am afraid that might mean that when you are at work, you are not completely focused there, and when you are acting in your role as bishop, you might be worried about your work or family. You need greater balance in your life.’”

This counsel had a profound impact. Elder Stevenson says, “I learned that it is important to maintain a balance of family, profession, and Church calling, and to make certain that you take care of yourself as well.”



As a Seventy and as Presiding Bishop, Elder Stevenson was known for compassion as gentle as the blossoms on a cherry tree (cherry blossoms are a celebrated symbol of Japan). He reached out to people close to home and far away to share “the healing balm of our Savior’s love.” As an Apostle he will continue to reach out to the poor and needy, to “succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees” (D&C 81:5).

Called to Serve—Again and Again

A respected business leader once encouraged Elder Stevenson to “learn, earn, and serve.” In 2004 the “serve” part of that equation was tested when Elder Stevenson and longtime business partner Scott Watterson were both called to serve as mission presidents. They felt they needed to explain to various stakeholders and customers why they were temporarily leaving their company. One by one they visited them.

“When we described our call and that we would serve for three years without compensation from the Church, they respected the goodness of that,” he says. They left the business in the hands of a trusted executive team, and it prospered.

As president of the Japan Nagoya Mission, Elder Stevenson found that his love for Asia deepened. “I consider it my second home,” he says. His depth of love for his wife also increased as he watched her embrace the local culture, reach out to others

including missionaries and members, and continue to raise their two sons who accompanied them. Several convert baptisms came in part as a result of her efforts to befriend those around her.

They had been home from their mission for only seven months when Elder Stevenson was called to serve in the First Quorum of the Seventy in 2008.

“I was stunned and humbled. I thought, ‘There are many others who could serve much better than I can.’ Yet I thought of previous times—as elders quorum president, high councilor, bishop, and counselor in a stake presidency—when I felt I was not seasoned enough to do the things I was asked to do. I have learned that before we are called, we may *not* be qualified, but the call *begins* a heavenly qualification.

“One of my favorite scriptures tells us two things we should do when we are called: First, ‘be faithful.’ Second, stand in the office in which you are appointed (see D&C 81:5).

To me this means to exhibit faith, learn what is needful, and then do all you can to magnify the call. If we do this, the Lord will magnify and qualify us to bless others.”

To Asia Again

As a Seventy, Elder Stevenson was assigned as a counselor in the Area Presidency and then as president of the Asia North Area.





In March 2011, an earthquake and tsunami devastated Japan. The 9.0-magnitude temblor generated a seismic sea wave that left 20,000 dead, displaced thousands, and destroyed 550,000 homes.

He visited the disaster zone many times. “As we met with people, our emotions ran from one end of the spectrum to the other,” he recalls. “We simultaneously observed tragedy and loss mixed with hope and restoration. Over and over again our hearts were touched as we witnessed the healing balm of our Savior’s love.”

In addition, he witnessed firsthand how the Church helps those in need: “To be able to react to a calamity and to help shape a response—that was a manifestation of the Church of Jesus Christ filling one of its divinely appointed responsibilities of caring for the poor and needy.” He described it as a sacred privilege to minister to those in need and see others do the same: “We learned about the goodness of humanity.”

The Legacy of Bishops

His understanding of compassion entered even more profoundly into his heart when in 2012 he was called as Presiding Bishop. In that capacity he managed a broad Church network that delivers welfare assistance and emergency response to Latter-day Saints and others, as well as humanitarian aid to Heavenly Father’s children in “some of the most difficult places, some of the most impoverished places, some of the most oppressed places around the world.”³

The role of bishop holds special significance for Elder Stevenson. “When I was 12, my father was called as bishop,” he recalls. “The ward had many widows, and Dad would often take me along when he ministered to them. He would have me take care of the garbage cans, clean

up something in the house, or get my friends to join me in raking leaves or shoveling snow. When we left, I always felt good inside. Visiting the widows helped me realize that part of what bishops do is minister to people one on one. The bishops of the Church are my heroes.”

A Promise from a Prophet

On the Tuesday prior to the October 2015 general conference, then-Bishop Stevenson received a call requesting that he meet with President Thomas S. Monson and his counselors.

“President Monson [extended] a call to the Quorum of the Twelve to me. He asked me if I would accept. . . . I responded affirmatively. And then . . . President Monson kindly reached out to me, describing how [when] he was called many years ago as an Apostle, . . . he too felt inadequate. He calmly instructed me, ‘Bishop Stevenson, the Lord will qualify those whom He calls.’ These soothing words of a prophet have been a source of peace [ever since].”⁴

Elder Gary E. Stevenson is truly a man without guile. As an Apostle, as he did as Presiding Bishop and as a Seventy and as he has done throughout his life, he will continue to reach out to the poor and needy. He will follow the scriptural charge to “succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees” (D&C 81:5). It is a challenging calling, but one to which he is well suited because of his understanding heart. ■

NOTES

1. Gary E. Stevenson, “Lean Not unto Thine Own Understanding” (Brigham Young University devotional, Jan. 14, 2014), 2, 3, speeches.byu.edu.
2. Gary E. Stevenson, “Plain and Precious Truths,” *Ensign or Liahona*, Nov. 2015, 92.
3. Gary E. Stevenson, press conference, Oct. 3, 2015.
4. Gary E. Stevenson, “Plain and Precious Truths,” 91.