

Dealing with My Parents' Breakup

NAME WITHHELD

Even as an adult, I found my parents' separation surprisingly painful and difficult.

Mom, why isn't Grandpa at Grandma's house anymore when we go to visit?" I'd known for some time the question would eventually come, yet I still wasn't prepared with an answer. Failed marriages are not uncommon, but the topic had now become more personal as I struggled to understand and deal with my parents' breakup.

As a happily married wife and the mother of several young children, I was surprised by the intensity with which this experience was taking hold in my life. Divorce is a life-transforming experience, not just for the couple who divorce but for their children as well. Researcher and author Judith Wallerstein, whose landmark studies have followed the children of divorced parents over a 25-year period, made the following statement: "One might think that the grown children of such couples might feel sad but not devastated. After all, they're adults. They're not losing the protection of an intact family, familiar surroundings, and other supports. But when we talk to them, they're profoundly distressed."¹

At the time my parents separated, my husband was experiencing serious health concerns, and I quickly became aware that my parents were so enveloped in their own turmoil that they were unable to offer me the emotional support I desperately needed. Instead, their needs were added to my already heavy concerns. I wasn't yet ready to confide in anyone about the difficulties my parents were having, and

as a result, I often felt there was no one I could lean on.

While adult children of divorced parents don't have to experience custody disputes, visitation arrangements, or financial-support issues, they may still face painful emotions and difficulties caused by changing family relationships. Although some couples are able to go their separate ways amicably, many divorces leave parents feeling like enemies on opposite sides of a battlefield. Adult children are often expected to traverse the difficult middle ground with ease. In reality, trying to maneuver between the intricate lines and boundaries of our parents' now separate lives can be a difficult and painful experience regardless of our age.

Just as we grieve at the death of a loved one, we will grieve at the death of an important relationship. When a loved one dies, we have the hope that our family ties will continue beyond the grave. However, when our parents' marriage ends, we can lose hope for that eternal family bond. There is no mortal relationship that is more intricately tied to who we are, and when it ends, grief in all its stages is to be expected.

Fortunately, there is help available to us if we must pass through this experience. While I found great benefit in the help of professional counselors, the most complete and lasting peace has come gradually, through the whisperings of the Spirit of the Lord as I have prayed, attended the temple, studied the scriptures, and counseled with an inspired bishop.



Satan is actively attacking the family. The wedge that had come between my parents caused doubt and discouragement to enter my own marriage.

Fighting Satan's Attacks

Church leaders have repeatedly warned us that Satan is actively attacking the family. Using parental divorce to drive wedges of doubt into children's marriages is one of Satan's tactics. When my parents separated, I felt doubt and discouragement about the security of my own marriage. After all, if this could happen to my parents, wasn't it extremely naive to believe it could never happen to me? I also felt guilty and unjustified in my pain because I still had a loving companion. When I finally recognized Satan as the source of the doubts, discouragement, and unjustified guilt, I was able to put those feelings behind me. I also realized that my husband and I have the power to protect our marriage by making a conscious effort to strengthen the love and commitment we have for each other. We who are married can be proactive in fighting Satan's attacks on our families.

President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) counseled that happiness in marriage comes “when a husband and wife go together frequently to the holy temple, kneel in prayer together in their home with their family, go hand in hand to their religious meetings, keep their lives wholly chaste,

mentally and physically, . . . and both are working together for the upbuilding of the kingdom of God.”² Judith Wallerstein’s research convinced her that a good marriage, more than any other adult relationship, has great healing potential.³ As I struggled to find peace, I was fortunate to have the powerful support and reassurance of a loving husband whose shoulders were frequently wet from my tears.

Dealing with Challenges

In many cases, divorce will change the relationship between parents and their children. These changes can disrupt our personal and cultural expectations of what a family is or how a family should act. One evening as my husband and I took a walk through our neighborhood, we watched as an older couple in our ward welcomed their grandchildren into their home. That simple experience sent me into an emotional tailspin as I realized that taking my children to see my parents would never be like the scene we had just witnessed. I had to accept the reality that my parents did not fit the role I had always envisioned for them. Elder Neal A. Maxwell of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (1926–2004) has said, “Within what is allotted to us, we can have spiritual contentment.”⁴ Once I changed my expectations, I was able to accept with gratitude whatever time and attention my parents were able to give to me and my children.

Another challenge is the celebration of special family occasions. In addition to the question of where to spend the holidays and with whom, gatherings such as weddings, birthdays, baptisms, and baby blessings can sometimes be spoiled by tension between parents. We have a right to expect that at these times all involved will put aside their differences and not allow the contentious spirit of the adversary to mar special events. A parent’s unwillingness or inability to respect our desires in this matter may create a need to change long-standing traditions in the celebration of special occasions. We may need to reconsider which family members will be invited or expected to attend.

It is likely that no matter what our course of action in dealing with changing relationships, someone in the family is not going to agree with us. A parent may feel hurt or be-

trayed if we are able to have a comfortable relationship with the former spouse—our other parent.

We may feel overwhelmed by “rules” or expectations that have no basis in reason but are determined entirely by our parents’ emotions. President Howard W. Hunter (1907–95) gave valuable counsel when he said, “Measure whatever anyone else asks you to do, whether it be from your family, loved ones, your cultural heritage, or traditions you have inherited—measure everything against the teachings of the Savior. Where you find a variance from those teachings, set that matter aside and do not pursue it. It will not bring you happiness.”⁵

As Latter-day Saints, we face a particularly difficult challenge if a parent has adopted a new lifestyle contrary to our own standards. We may feel that including this parent in our lives compromises our principles. Will contact with the parent and his or her lifestyle confuse our children about the standards we are trying to teach them? President

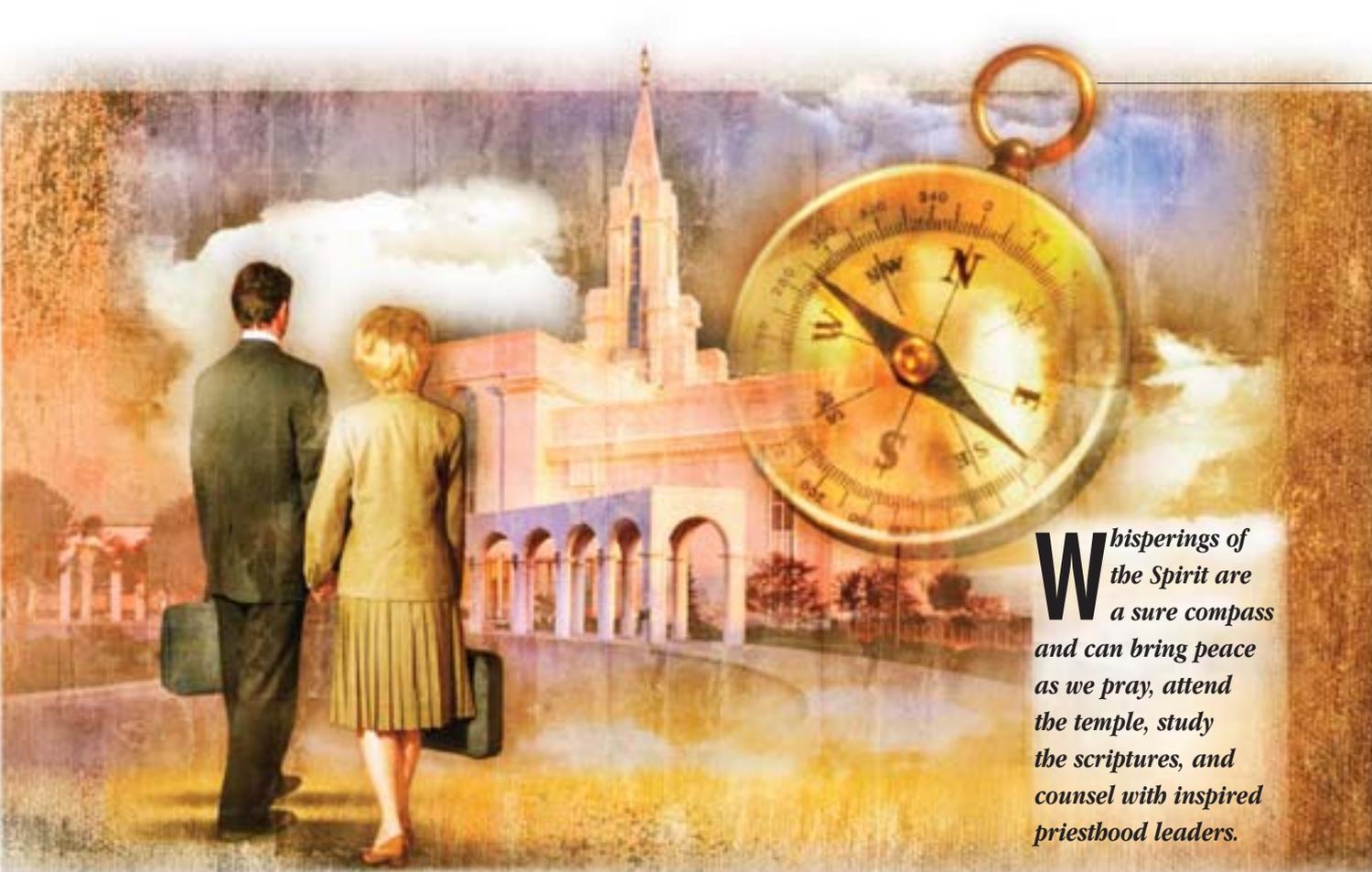
James E. Faust offered some counsel that we can use in answering these questions:

“There are three sources of guidance for making moral judgments. First is the guidance of the Holy Ghost. This is always a sure compass for those who have been baptized and received this supernal gift. The second source is the wise counsel of priesthood leaders whom the Lord has put in place to guide us. Third, the constant demonstration of love should temper all our judgments.”⁶

Healing through the Atonement

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges many children face when their parents’ marriage ends is a deep feeling of anger. Often this anger continues long afterward. Complete healing and peace are not possible until the anger is cleansed from our hearts and we are able to forgive completely. While a counselor in the Presiding Bishopric, Bishop H. Burke Peterson wrote, “No one can be classed as a true follower of the Savior who is not in the process of removing from his heart and mind every feeling of ill will, bitterness, hatred, envy, or jealousy toward another.”⁷ It is impossible for us to feel the complete peace the Savior offers His followers unless we are willing to let go of anger and other negative feelings and seek the





Whisperings of the Spirit are a sure compass and can bring peace as we pray, attend the temple, study the scriptures, and counsel with inspired priesthood leaders.

healing that can be found through His Atonement.

The pain of my parents' separation has taught me of the power of the Atonement and of the relationship among justice, love, and mercy. On one occasion an inspired bishop reminded me that justice is not my job. The Savior said, "Leave judgment alone with me, for it is mine and I will repay" (D&C 82:23). The temple has truly become a place of revelation for me, and I have felt the whisperings of the Spirit clearly telling me that it is neither my right nor my responsibility to punish my parents for their decisions. All I need to do is to love them as my parents. The scriptures clearly give the same message: "I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men" (D&C 64:10).

As I tried to match my actions to my acceptance of my parents' now separate lives, I fervently prayed and studied the teachings of the Savior. One day I found myself listening to a beautiful piece of music which included the following words from St. Francis of Assisi:

*Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;*

Where there is darkness, light;

And where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

To be consoled as to console;

To be understood as to understand;

To be loved as to love.

A wonderful feeling of peace flowed through me. I have realized that as I follow the teachings of the Savior and seek the gift of charity in my life, I can respond with love to all of my family members regardless of their situation. As I have done my best to be an instrument of peace, I have experienced the healing power of the Atonement. Anger and pain have been replaced by forgiveness, love, and understanding. I know for myself that Jesus Christ bore my grief and carried my sorrow and that through Him I have been healed. ■

NOTES

1. Judith Wallerstein and others, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* (2000), 83.
2. *Marriage and Divorce* (1976), 24.
3. See *Legacy of Divorce*, 261.
4. "Content with the Things Allotted unto Us," *Ensign*, May 2000, 72.
5. "Counsel to Students and Faculty," Church College of New Zealand, 12 Nov. 1990; as quoted in Richard G. Scott, "Removing Barriers to Happiness," *Ensign*, May 1998, 85.
6. "The Weightier Matters of the Law: Judgment, Mercy, and Faith," *Ensign*, Nov. 1997, 54.
7. "Removing the Poison of an Unforgiving Spirit," *Ensign*, Nov. 1983, 60.