

YOUNG ADULTS



It's Where I'm Headed, Not Where I've Been

By Richard Monson

My life didn't exactly turn out the way I thought.

At 18, I expected to serve a full-time mission, get married relatively soon thereafter, and start a family by 25. Now I'm 32 years old. I didn't serve a mission, and I was inactive in the Church for most of my adult life. I got married—got divorced—and got married again.

Because I took a path that diverged from the strait and narrow multiple times, I haven't always felt like I fit in at church. However, I've come to realize that there is a place for me. My experiences have taught me that the power of the Savior and His Atonement is real and that what matters most isn't where I've been but which way I'm going now.

I think I initially questioned what I believed because I wasn't confident that my testimony was strong enough for me to go on a mission. I remember around the time I graduated high school thinking something like, *What if my testimony isn't fully mine? What if I've been relying too much on the testimonies of other people?*

That bothered me. I wanted to go on a mission, but I wondered if the spiritual experiences I had had up to that point were enough to make me what I thought a successful missionary was supposed to be—someone who had enough spiritual strength and knew enough about the gospel to teach other people.

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Looking back, I should have asked God to help me understand the counsel given in Doctrine and Covenants 124:97: “Let him be humble before me, . . . and he shall receive of my Spirit, even the Comforter, which shall manifest unto him the truth of all things, and shall give him, in the very hour, what he shall say.”

But rather than asking God, I got lost in comparing my spiritual stature to others', and I was afraid that my inadequacies would keep people from accepting the gospel.

Out on my own as a young adult, I continued trying to figure out what I believed. I didn't see the harm of what I saw as isolated decisions that didn't redefine who I was as a person. I began to pull away from those that I loved because I knew they would be disappointed in the choices I was making. Instead, I surrounded myself with people who didn't really care what I was doing.

One day I tried an alcoholic drink out of curiosity. Drinking became a part of my life and eventually went from just recreation to something I used as a crutch to cope with difficult experiences. The negative changes in my life during that time weren't necessarily tied to any one choice; they were gradual. It took me two years to realize that the small choices I made over time had led me to a place I didn't want to be.

Now, I'm not saying that in order to learn the truthfulness of the gospel, you should experience the opposite. My actions caused pain not just for me but also for people I loved—much of it unnecessary. I'm grateful that I was able to humble myself enough to realize that (1) I was miserable, and (2) I had been happiest when I was living God's commandments. That was something I knew for myself, something I could stand behind and share with others.

I went to my bishop to make things right, and we met regularly to prepare me to serve a mission. My papers were almost finished when I was prompted to make sure that he understood some of the choices I had made. That conversation wasn't easy, but even more than I wanted to go on a mission, I wanted to be right before God. I was willing to own what I had done wrong and lay it all out before Him so I could be clean.

Soon after, I came before a disciplinary council. It was scary in some ways to admit what I had done in front of people who had been my leaders and mentors for years, but as I looked around the room, I felt peace. I could see that they were there to understand and help me. As I left, I felt the Spirit assure me that no matter what the decision was, I was doing my part and I was going to be OK. God and leaders who loved me would work with me to get me where I needed to be. I walked away feeling the love of the Savior and knowing that I wasn't beyond His redemption.

A Place for Imperfection

Despite the peace I had felt, it was hard to face the questions from people about why I wasn't on a mission. As I continued working through the repentance process with the help of my bishop, it became less and less likely that serving a mission was in my future. I had to figure out how to move forward with my life. At 21, because I didn't fall into the pre-missionary, returned missionary, or married groups of young adults, it was hard to feel like I belonged anywhere.

Dating was tough. Sometimes girls would treat me differently after I would tell them I didn't serve a mission and that I was inactive for a period of time. For one reason or another, most interactions never made it past the first date.

I was happy that I eventually did get married in the temple, but sometimes I still felt like I didn't fit in. I had a testimony, but I couldn't figure out how to share it, and church classrooms felt like tests

where my peers would see me fail. I thought that because most of them had the lives I wanted, they hadn't stumbled as much as I had.

One day the bishop called me in and extended the call to teach elders quorum. I was surprised, since I had only been to elders quorum twice in the last year. Despite feeling incredibly anxious, I accepted the calling. On my first Sunday teaching, I found myself starting out with probably the strangest introduction they had ever heard:

"Hi, brothers, I'm Richard Monson. I never served a mission and I've been inactive most of my adult life. I haven't attended elders quorum pretty much ever because I don't feel like I belong or fit in. I won't be able to answer all your questions, but I'm hoping that you will participate so we can learn together. If you're OK with where I'm coming from, then we'll get started."

I realized that day that I could admit to others—and to myself—that even though I didn't consider myself a "straight arrow" (someone who served a mission, was active all their lives, and hadn't made serious mistakes), I was

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pointed in the same direction as they were, and that was what mattered. To my amazement, I found that more than one of these men whom I thought led perfect lives had made mistakes too. I think it reinforced the idea to all of us that perfection isn't a requirement to bring value to the class or the Church as a whole.

Difficult Times and a Decision

Unfortunately, my activity in the Church didn't last. My marriage was difficult, and I turned to old vices to escape my pain. Hobbies began to replace church attendance.

Three years passed, and I reached rock bottom. I had to make a choice. Could I live the gospel for myself regardless of what was happening in my life? Or would I just give in to the darkness? I knew that committing to the strait and narrow path meant getting rid of negative influences in my life. Also, my desires to go back to church highlighted that my spouse and I were on different paths. With the state of our marriage at that point, we were headed toward divorce already.

I was scared. There was no guarantee that my efforts would grant me the good things I wanted in this life. But my decision came back to what I had learned years before—that I was happiest living the gospel. I decided to commit fully and put myself in God's hands, come what may. From here on out, it was me and Him.

Once again, I started going back to church and getting my life on track. One of the happiest days of my life was when I received a temple recommend again. I found solace in the temple as my marriage continued to fracture and ultimately came to an end.

Finding My Source of Self-Worth

As scary as that decision felt, through that experience I learned to appreciate God's hand in my path. Even though I had stumbled, the race wasn't lost. I wasn't competing with anyone else. When I relied on the Savior for my self-worth, I could stop spending all my efforts trying to change others' perspective of me.

I found myself at church being OK sitting alone or amidst members who were in different stages of life. I made an effort not to hide and made myself available to talk with people in my ward. I was able to enjoy attending my meetings for their intended purpose.

Having that peace also helped as I got back into dating. I still didn't get a lot of second dates, but I now knew I didn't have to compromise my standards just because I had slipped up in the past. I was living the gospel to the best of my ability, and I was good enough to date those who were living the gospel to the best of theirs too.

I ultimately found a worthy daughter of God who I married in the temple. Her path was very different than mine, but when it came to a love of the Savior

and an understanding of His Atonement, we were on the same page.

Over the years, I have learned not to let my past or other people's approval define my current self-worth. I've let go of the idea that success looks like one set of life experiences. Not everyone has appreciated where I am now because of how I've gotten here, and that's OK. It's not my goal to convince them. It is my goal to keep repenting and coming closer to the Savior. It's because of Him that, like Alma the Younger after his repentance, I can be "harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more" (Alma 36:19). I can be at peace knowing that it's where I'm headed—toward the Savior—that counts. ■



Richard Monson

lives in Utah, USA, and works as a software

development project manager. He and his wife enjoy going on motorcycle rides, traveling, and cooking together in their free time.

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