



# Cultivating Sensitivity to Others

*Becoming more aware of the unique challenges of those around us makes us better neighbors, friends, and Saints.*

BY ANDREA WORTHINGTON SNARR

One sunny day I walked to my mailbox to retrieve the mail. Among the bills, I saw an envelope with my name typed on it. Excited to receive a letter, I quickly opened it. Then my hopes were shattered as I realized that someone had sent me an anonymous letter containing parenting tips. Photocopied articles explained how to say no to children and outlined the social ills resulting from parents' failures.

Obviously, the sender had noticed our son's difficulties. What the sender apparently did not know, however, is that our son has a neurological condition related to autism. Our efforts to help this son had been extremely time-consuming and expensive—including therapy, doctors, medications, parenting classes, alternative schooling, research, conferences, and consistent routines. If only the sender had known how hard we were trying.

I hurried inside to have a good cry. Fortunately, I had a friend I could call on for support.

She reassured me with kind words. Still, after that I found myself looking around, wondering who was judging me. Years after that regrettable incident, I harbor no malice for the letter's author, who simply didn't understand our situation. But the letter taught me that loving others includes striving to understand and be sensitive to their unique situations. All of us are individuals with varied life experiences. Some of us marry in this life; others remain single. Some have many children; others have none or few. Some endure divorce. Some pray daily for wayward children. Some struggle with chronic illness or disabilities.

Alma's counsel to his son Corianton can guide us in our efforts to become more sensitive: "See that you are merciful





unto your brethren; deal justly, judge righteously, and do good continually” (Alma 41:14).

### Increase Awareness

Unfortunately, we are often unintentionally insensitive simply because we are unaware of what others are experiencing. Ashley Henderson\* stopped going to church when it seemed that the main topics of conversation surrounding her were whom she was dating and why she wasn't married. People were probably just trying to be friendly and make conversation, but it made her feel out of place to be constantly reminded of her singleness. “I felt I didn't belong anywhere,” she recalls. After she eventually did marry, she continued to avoid church. Then a loving and sensitive elderly couple in the ward were instrumental in helping Ashley

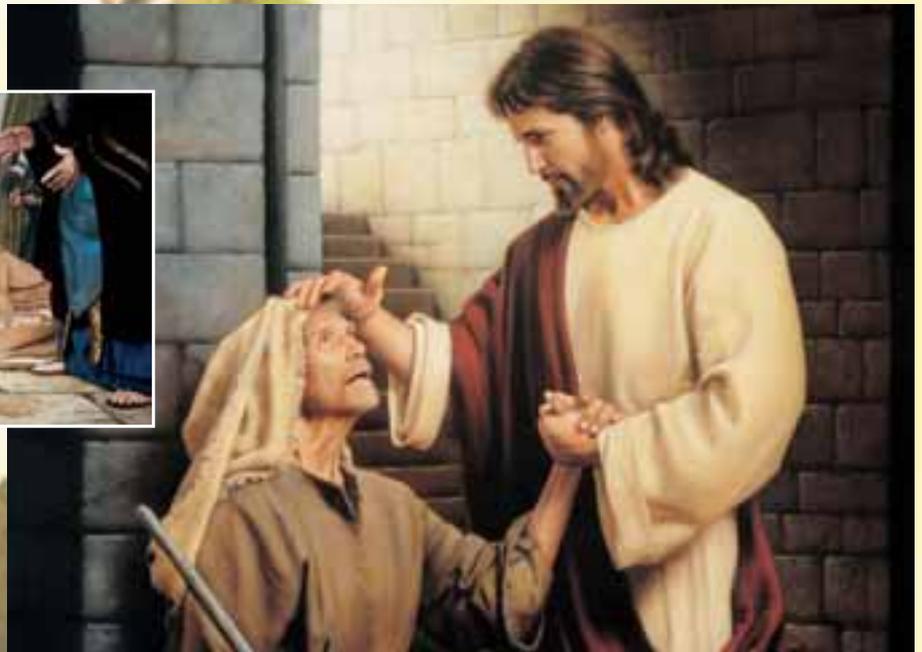
and her husband return to the blessings of the gospel. “Their love seemed to make the big step of returning to church seamless,” recalls Sister Henderson. Several other couples in their ward also embraced the Hendersons. “I have always heard that friends are hard to come by,” says Sister Henderson. “But it seems, in our ward at least, that everyone is a friend, and no one is left out.”

It's not only insensitive words that can inflict pain. Sometimes saying nothing hurts too. When Lou Banks\* went through a divorce, he felt lost. “In my ward, I basically became invisible,” remembers Brother Banks. “People were not rude to me, but they made a wide path around me. I just didn't fit in. Almost all social arrangements were made by the sisters, so I never felt included in ward activities.” It was after Brother Banks married again that he finally regained a sense of belonging.

Thoughtfully and tactfully acknowledging others' pain and expressing encouragement can help them feel you are aware of them and can provide hope. It can be as simple as saying, “I'm glad you're here today. We need you in our ward.”

### Avoid Assumptions

Often when we make assumptions about another person, we are mistaken. This is because we rarely understand the complexities of another's life. One couple



\*Names have been changed.

who had been unable to have children received counsel from a member of their bishopric not to put off having a family in order to accumulate wealth and enjoy “a few of the good things in life.” The bishopric member didn’t know that the couple had been trying to have children for years and was now waiting to adopt a child.

David and Shauntel Hogan also recall hurtful comments when they experienced childlessness. Sister Hogan says that experience taught her that people are not intentionally insensitive—they just have limited experience and understanding. “It’s a matter of awareness. We all need to think about what we say to others because we all experience sensitive situations of some kind. I’ve learned never to assume anything. We need to take the time to get to know people. This cultivates understanding,” says Sister Hogan.

During their years of infertility challenges, the Hogans also received outpourings of love from family and friends. Just before an expensive medical procedure, they received an unexpected note containing not only moral support but financial assistance. That note is now a cherished keepsake. Eventually, the Hogans adopted three children. “We relied heavily on the experience and encouragement of friends and neighbors who preceded us on the adoption path,” relates Sister Hogan. “But others also took time to listen and express their confidence in us, even when they did not know exactly what we were experiencing. We had a cheering section enduring times

of uncertainty *with us*,” relates Sister Hogan. “We knew we were not alone.”

### **Extend Respect**

Fortunately, our status—marital, financial, or social—does not define us as individuals. Nor should it determine the way we treat others. As Brother Terrance D. Olson noted: “Respect is an expression of our sense of universal brotherhood or sisterhood—a testimony of our membership in the human family. It acknowledges our common humanity and shows our reverence for children of God.”<sup>1</sup>

The Lord is no respecter of persons (see D&C 1:35). He loves us all because we are all His children. When we see others in this light, we can’t help but love and try to understand them too. This is an effective way we can honor our baptismal covenants to “mourn with those that mourn . . . and comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:9).

Indeed, when Jesus walked the earth, He often associated with those whom others rejected. He loved the Samaritan woman at the well. He healed the lame, the blind, those afflicted with demons, and the lepers. And He made it clear that we should not assume that others’ afflictions are the result of their unrighteousness:

“And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth.

“And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?

“Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him” (John 9:1–3).

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## Show Kindness

Kindness and understanding should be at the heart of our relationships with others. Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught:

“Kindness is a passport that opens doors and fashions friends. It softens hearts and molds relationships that can last lifetimes. . . .

“Kindness is the essence of a celestial life. Kindness is how a Christlike person treats others. Kindness should permeate all of our words and actions at work, at school, at church, and especially in our homes.”<sup>2</sup>

The Savior’s interaction with the woman taken in adultery is a perfect example of kindness and mercy. Hoping to catch Jesus in a trap, the Pharisees demanded to know whether the woman would be stoned for her unrighteous choices, according to the law of Moses. The Lord replied, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her” (John 8:7). Though He did not take her sin lightly, his actions spared her from stoning. He mercifully helped the woman understand that she was not hopelessly condemned and that she could change. Jesus also helped the self-righteous accusers, who were focusing on the woman’s sin without seeing their own.

One important way to show kindness is by refusing to gossip. Did you know that if you place several inchworms on the outside rim of a flowerpot, they will crawl around and around the rim until they starve? Even though food may be accessible a small distance away inside the pot, the worms will continue to mindlessly follow the worm ahead of them. So it is with gossip

and those who spread it. The tales go around and around, doing nobody any good.

## Resist Taking Offense

Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has suggested that when people are “inconsiderate and tactless,” we can “choose not to be offended.”<sup>3</sup> Developing our ability to resist being offended can be an insulating factor for all of us, including those who have significant challenges.

One morning I awoke to an icy scene outside my window. A wet snow had fallen and frozen during the cold hours. Little finches filled a tree where a bird feeder hung. The birds had fluffed out their feathers, making them look twice as large and protecting them from the harsh weather. It dawned on me that we can do this to protect ourselves when insensitive comments are carelessly flung toward us. We can warm ourselves with our own sure knowledge that God is mindful of us and that we are faithfully holding to His promises.

And we can increase our ability to love others. Everyone

deals with something difficult. We all have weaknesses. Some deficits are more obvious than others, but everyone must overcome some obstacles. Why not help each other along, build each other up, and relieve each other’s burdens rather than make the journey even more difficult with criticism?

## Do Good Continually

In one of my favorite books, *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, tending a garden brings healing to a sickly boy who once focused only on his negative situation



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## HELPS FOR HOME EVENING

1. To help your children have more empathy for those with disabilities, try using one or more of the following object lessons: (1) Have family members do simple household chores with one arm; (2) Try explaining something by only using hand movements; (3) Construct a simple obstacle course for family members to go through with their eyes closed.

2. Share ideas from the article and talk about other times when it is important to be sensitive to others, such as welcoming a new ward member, being friendly to one whose spouse is not a member, or including single members.

and to a young girl who was once selfish and sour. A wise old gardener teaches a principle of gardening that can be applied to our attitude toward life: Where you tend a rose, a thistle cannot grow. Good deeds and good words can help us keep disappointments and difficulties from dominating our attitude.

I have been blessed with friends steeped in gospel living who have helped me keep the thistles at bay in my life's garden. One night our son's difficulties were thwarting our family's plans to go out to dinner for a daughter's birthday. Then, providentially, a friend appeared at our door, offering to stay with our son so we could celebrate the occasion. We knew we had experienced a tender mercy from the Lord, and we were grateful for a friend who followed the Savior's example of going about doing good.

We can help plant roses in each other's lives so that the thistles of life will not choke out the joy of God's love—and His gospel. We can help each other along life's path by being tactful and sensitive to others' unique situations. We can help others maintain their privacy and not gossip about their challenges. We can unify our wards and branches by supporting each other and cheering each other on instead of being accomplices to divisiveness. Then we will find ourselves enjoying more fully the blessings of living together in God's garden. ■

### NOTES

1. "Cultivating Respect," *Ensign*, Oct. 2001, 48.
2. "The Virtue of Kindness," *Ensign*, May 2005, 26.
3. "And Nothing Shall Offend Them," *Ensign*, Nov. 2006, 91.

