

When a Child Leaves the Church

We can embrace the principle that our children are blessed with agency, even when they use it to head in directions we don't agree with.

By Robin Zenger Baker

Weeks had passed since my adult daughter had moved to a new city, and each Sunday that she missed church brought me the same concerns. Would she ever return to church? I tried everything I could think of to get her there: encouragement, logic, pleading, acting as her personal alarm clock, prayer, fasting, even calling her bishop. Since we lived 2,000 miles (3,220 km) apart, it was difficult for me to attend with her, but I even tried that!

I continually imagined that if I could just tweak the situation a little, my daughter would reestablish her spiritual trajectory. I felt I just needed the right person—her visiting teacher, her bishop, a friend or family member—to be placed in her path to say or do just the thing that would steer her back. But nothing was working. My head spun with worry, and my heart filled with guilt and anguish that I had failed her as a parent.

Many others share my experience. When children leave the gospel path, it can be very difficult for parents who remain faithful to cope. One mother was so upset by her daughter's choices that she said it felt painful to breathe. A father shared that he felt his children were rejecting him and his way of life. A young mother worried that her own

young children might someday question themselves out of the Church.

How do we cope with these painful feelings when family members choose to leave the Church? There are several things we can do.

Learn from Others Who Have Struggled

Some of the most righteous families in the scriptures struggled with rebellious children. Sarah and Lehi had children who abandoned their parents' teachings (see 1 Nephi 2:8–12). So did Adam and Eve (see Genesis 4:8). Even our heavenly parents sorrowed when a third of their spirit children chose another path (see D&C 29:36). The plan of happiness includes agency. And that means that even members of righteous families may choose to reject gospel principles. We can gain comfort from the stories of struggling families in the scriptures. We gain a better understanding of agency and empathy, and that understanding can help us heal and move ahead.

Recognize Our Children Are Also God's

When her teenage son started questioning his beliefs, one mother became overwhelmed with feelings of guilt and failure. While thinking of how she could have parented



differently, she received a merciful impression: “He is *not* only your child. I love him even more than you, and I’m not feeling guilty about him or any of my other wandering children.” From that moment on, this mother was able to let go of the guilt and focus instead on what a lovely child of God her son was.

Focus on Success

Sometimes parents struggle because they do not completely understand the teaching that “no other success can compensate for failure in the home.”¹ Success and failure are not easily defined. As Elder John K. Carmack, a former member of the Seventy, explains, “Because this statement was intended to inspire parents to become or stay involved with their children, it should not be taken to mean that parents who have indeed put great time, effort, and sacrifice into parenting, and yet who have still not reaped the desired rewards, have failed.”² We need to celebrate the good qualities of our children and the happy moments we shared. We should embrace the principle that our family members are blessed with agency, however they may use it.

Adjust Our Expectations

While we hope family members will follow paths we have chosen, they must choose for themselves to receive the blessings of the gospel. Elder Carmack suggests that instead of fighting this reality, parents may need to “adjust their present expectations and approach, accepting things as they are rather than continuing in turmoil.”³

A mother felt frustrated and sad as she realized her son would not go on a mission. Eventually she recognized that she needed to let go of the thought that her son had to go on a mission in order for her to be happy. “I was finally able to realize, this is not about me,” she said. “Each child’s life is *their* life. I’m just their mother. I don’t own them.”

Gain Insight

Many parents find solace and maintain perspective in prayer, scripture study, and temple attendance. One

parent shared that her experience with prayer taught her to remember how precious her child is to Heavenly Father, which helped lift her pain. Prayer brings helpful insights into what to do and say. It also helps us find consolation.

Scriptures tell stories of people who have made poor choices and how family members have coped. “It’s a good thing the scriptures aren’t full of stories about perfect families or we might be too discouraged to even try!” one parent shared. The story of Alma the Younger reassures us that the righteous prayers of parents are heard (see Mosiah 27:14). The parable of the prodigal son teaches us the joy we feel when someone who was lost returns (Luke 15:20–24).

Temple attendance can also help us gain useful insights to deal with family issues. “I believe that the busy person . . . can solve . . . problems better and more quickly in the house of the Lord than anywhere else,” said Elder John A. Widtsoe (1872–1952) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. “At the most unexpected moments, in or out of the temple will come . . . as a revelation, the solution [to] the problems that vex [our lives].”⁴ As parents attend the temple, their hearts and minds can become more attuned to the peace they seek.

Continue to Show Love

Lehi and Sariah undoubtedly loved Laman and Lemuel just as much as they loved Sam, Nephi, Jacob, and Joseph. While it can be easier to get along with family members who share our beliefs and lifestyle, it is still crucial for us to learn to show our love for others who don’t.

One woman who stopped attending church at a young age shared the following experience of how her family continued loving her. In her large LDS family, missions were celebrated in a visible way. Photographs of all the missionaries in the family adorned her grandmother’s living room wall. It was “the epicenter of our family’s universe,” she said. She knew she would never serve a mission, and she felt that no matter what good she did in the world, she would never earn a place on her grandmother’s wall.



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At age 30 she decided to serve in the United States Peace Corps. She journeyed to Madagascar and devoted all her energy to serving there. Partway through her experience, she learned that her grandmother had included her photo on the wall. When the Peace Corps term ended, grandmother and granddaughter embraced and shed tears. “Service is service,” her grandmother explained. Whether or not we have a missionary wall in our homes, there are still plenty of ways we can show *all* our family members they are loved and valued.

Hold On to Hope

As we keep loving our loved ones as they currently are, we can still hold on to the hope that they will return to a gospel-centered life. Often family members do return after a period of wandering. Like the prodigal son, they realize that their former lives brought them good messages and principles, and they embrace those values once again. In fact, prophets have promised that family members who are sealed to parents will feel the tug of their righteous upbringing and will someday return.⁵ Such promises give us great hope for our own loved ones.

Maintain an Eternal View

We must remember that we simply do not know what will happen to our loved ones. One father of rebellious teens shared that he has learned that even though his sons are not living righteously right now, he should not assume

that disaster is imminent. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, Second Counselor in the First Presidency, suggests that sometimes we believe that the end of the story has already been written, when in reality, we are only in the middle chapters.⁶ God’s reckoning of time is vastly different from ours, and we do not know how each person’s story will end.

If we knew that our family members would eventually return, would that change how we act in our stories today? I believe we might live with a much greater degree of peace, love, and acceptance. As we work to make our story turn out well, it helps to remember that we can choose to approach loved ones from a place of peace and love rather than anger and fear. As Paul wrote, “God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7). As Elder Carmack urges: “Never give up. If you cannot seem to reach your daughter or son now, you can at least keep trying and keep loving them. . . . Do not give in to paralyzing feelings of guilt and hopelessness. Seek spiritual help and peace. Be strong and courageous. You will see it through.”⁷

My daughter has not yet returned to church. But our goals are clear; we are both working to stay close. We talk frequently, and I know her LDS upbringing has helped her to become kind, disciplined, and thoughtful. While I would never have chosen for her to take the path she is currently traveling, I am grateful for the lessons we are learning along the way. And I have found peace as I embrace our unique positions in our journeys back home. ■

The author lives in Massachusetts, USA.

NOTES

1. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, Apr. 1964, 5; quoted from J. E. McCulloch, *Home: The Savior of Civilization* (1924), 42.
2. John K. Carmack, “When Our Children Go Astray,” *Ensign*, Feb. 1997, 9.
3. John K. Carmack, “When Our Children Go Astray,” 9.
4. John A. Widtsoe, “Temple Worship,” *The Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, vol. 22 (1921), 63–64, quoted in David B. Haight, “Temples and Work Therein,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1990, 61.
5. See “Hope for Parents of Wayward Children,” *Ensign*, Sept. 2002, 11.
6. See Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “See the End from the Beginning,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2006, 42–45.
7. John K. Carmack, “When Our Children Go Astray,” 10, 13.