A Single Parent, but Not Alone

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Nineteen eighty-nine started off auspiciously enough. I had been married twenty-one years and was mother to seven children. My husband, Bob, was serving as a counselor in our stake presidency. We were all healthy and happy. But on 8 August 1989, a deputy from the San Diego County Coroner’s Office walked up my driveway to share news with me that would alter my role for the rest of my earthly tenure. My husband had been killed in a private airplane accident not far from our home.

In the six-plus years since that accident, I have weathered the practical and emotional demands of single parenthood and hopefully gleaned a few things that I can share regarding the rigors of that role.

I know that there are many single adults in the Church—some widows or widowers, some divorced, some never married. While we are all in unique situations, nevertheless there is common ground. Few of us ever imagined rearing our children or spending our later years alone. Most of us face grief for what we once had or for what we wish we had. Many of us fight depression, exhaustion, and feelings of inadequacy.

I have identified an incredible dichotomy in the role that was placed upon me as a single parent. First, suddenly I became the sole provider for my family, singularly responsible for the care and upbringing of my children, for both their temporal and their spiritual welfare. In this role I had to become strong and independent to survive. Second, more than ever before, simultaneously I had the absolute need to become childlike and dependent.

Upon whom? Upon the Lord. We must be willing to accept with childlike faith what has happened, knowing that ultimately the Lord will provide and reward. Remember the words in Proverbs 3:5 [Prov. 3:5], “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.”

More than anything else, we must learn to turn to our Heavenly Father for help. Whenever we say, “I must do all these things, but I can’t do them alone,” we are absolutely right. The pipeline to heaven must be constantly open so that we are prepared to ask for and then receive help on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis.
Let me give you a few examples of when help was needed. I find disciplining my children one of the areas in which I most miss the priesthood holder in our home. I dislike the confrontations and always wondering whether I have been too lenient or too harsh. I really miss the sounding board and reinforcement that my husband was. One night one of my dear daughters came in after curfew, by just a few minutes. I lay in bed trying to decide what to do. Then I knelt at my bedside and asked Heavenly Father to please guide me. As I got up from my knees, I knew without doubt that I could not let the incident go. I went in to handle it.

In another situation, I finally gathered the means and the courage to try a family vacation without Bob. I wanted it to be a truly rewarding experience, to be fun but also to provide some of the spiritual food for my kids that I felt they were missing out on without Bob leading our home. I planned for us to visit Kirtland and then go on to Niagara Falls and finally the pageant at the Hill Cumorah.

Well, I got us lost coming back to the motel from Niagara Falls at night. I wept in a Denny’s restaurant. By the next day when we actually were walking into the Sacred Grove, the children were nagging and picking at each other as children will do. How can you argue at the site of one of the most spiritual occurrences of this dispensation? At my wit’s end, I sent everyone to the rest rooms and bowed my head in prayer.

When I emerged from the rest room, a man who was a stranger had one of my sons engaged in conversation. As each of the children gathered, he had my son introduce them, and then me. He introduced himself as Michael Moody. He is the chairman of the General Music Committee of the Church. He then introduced his wife. Although they also had their children with them, they proceeded to walk in the grove with us, saving the entire experience. Their soft conversation created the atmosphere I had hoped for, causing the children to reflect on where they were and what had occurred there. At the end of our time in the grove, I told Brother Moody that I knew he must be an angel. I told him of our circumstances and that just when I needed him most, the Lord had opened a window from heaven and Brother Moody and his wife had fallen through. There have been many times in the last few years when the Lord has allowed people to fall through those windows.

I have also been blessed by the support system of the Church, notably home and visiting teachers. But, speaking personally, I do not expect my home teacher to take out my garbage. I do not expect my visiting teacher to do my laundry (although in the nonfunctional first week after Bob’s passing, both of those things were done for me and were greatly appreciated). I need to work out the majority of these practical things with my children, giving them responsibilities.

Yet I do appreciate the things that are done to assist me as a single parent. It is truly helpful when home teachers come prepared with a message. It is difficult for single parents to consistently do the things they know they should. Family home evenings sometimes suffer, even though we know of their importance, because we simply lack the energy to adequately and regularly prepare. So when home teachers come into our homes as noble priesthood bearers, our children learn to respect the authority they hold. I hope they bring a gospel message. I hope they know the children’s names so the children recognize they are cared about.

Besides those who have specific and scriptural assignments of watchcare to a family such as mine, there also have been caring neighbors and fellow ward members who have reached out in sensitive
ways to lift and strengthen me and my children. Such help has come in many forms: invitations to share an evening together, helps and hints for those improved family home evenings, the taking of a son or daughter on an outing, a phone call, or an impromptu visit. All of these acts of kindness have been helpful. To those who have never thought to do some of these things, I say please don’t feel guilty. Six years ago it would not have entered my mind either.

Sometimes, sustaining acts of kindness happen spontaneously. Let me give an example. One day I walked into sacrament meeting a little frazzled, as usual, from the responsibilities of getting my family prepared and being ready to function in my calling. Out of the clear blue, a sister who was visiting our ward stopped me as I headed down the aisle. She reached her arms out to me and said, “I just need to tell you what a great job you are doing. I can tell because I see your children and they are terrific.” Whether I totally believed her or not was beside the point. That was all I needed to make it through the rest of the Sabbath with renewed commitment.

Such an experience has strengthened my resolve to be sensitive to others and not to get lost in my own problems. I know there are others who need my strengthening hands and words of encouragement. It is so important to squeeze a hand, pat a shoulder, and give a compliment.

As I spoke with a friend about preparing this talk, I mentioned the concern of increasing the spirituality in my home without having a priesthood bearer present. “That’s easy,” she said. “You do the same things whether Bob is there or not.” There is great truth in what she said. It seems like whenever there is a problem, we just need to examine whether we are doing the basics or not. Are we having family home evening? Doing scripture study? Having family prayer? Receiving blessings ourselves as we need them? Playing Church music or other edifying music? Expressing love to one another?

However, in our unique situations I feel there is another all-pervading factor, and that is our attitude. I cannot mention attitude without marveling at the example of a distinguished athlete who faced a calamity that ended his career. He was asked by a reporter if he ever questioned, “Why me?” His response taught me a great lesson. He said that if he questioned “Why me?” when coping with the challenge of illness, then he also must question “Why me?” about all of the blessings he had received in his life.

I have learned that there are two kinds of attitudes—the perceived and the actual. Let me explain. I discovered rather early in the grieving process after I lost my husband that people wanted to believe that I was doing well. Their motivation was sincere—they truly wanted me to be doing well. When I occasionally bared the innermost agony of my soul, they were left feeling awkward and inadequate. It became much easier to simply respond “Fine” to the “How are you doing?” question. I now refer to this as the “all is well” syndrome.

Dishonest as it may seem, I came to find great value in this little deception. I began to believe it myself. Even though I was overwhelmed with responsibilities, and depression at not being able to be everything to everyone often surfaced, it became more and more pleasant and expedient to face each day with the “I can” attitude.

I know that this sounds like a cheerleader or a Pollyanna—very simplistic. Yet think for a moment about the kind of people you like to be around. They are not the ones who appear so burdened down that there is no joy in them. They are not the morose souls who have lost the light of Christ. So don’t
let yourself be that way either. Don’t get sucked into that descending cycle that is so difficult to break out of. When you are in that downward spiral, you take those around you with you. Think of your children. Constantly bemoaning one’s fate does not promote any joyful exchanges between you and them. While children need to be sensitive to the demands on you, they also need to have you love and cherish them. Try to let them know that they are your joy, not your burdens. Come home from work and instead of immediately questioning them on the status of homework and chores, say, “I’m so glad that I have you to come home to.” Just use a few right phrases—“I looked forward all day to being with you.” How about, “I hope your day went well—I prayed for you this morning.”

At a Young Women stake leadership meeting I received a handout with a statement that struck me as being so appropriate to this practice. It said: “I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the home. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather.” While this may be true in all homes, it is especially appropriate to those where only one adult has input in regard to establishing the atmosphere of the home.

Finally, there will be days when the weight of your role will nearly overwhelm you. There are bound to be those times when you simply must allow yourself to have a good cry. Maybe you need to unburden yourself to the bishop or a good friend. Permit yourself to do this, cleanse your soul—but then get back in the ring. You can do it. You are doing it. The Lord knows you can do it. I salute you, and so does the rest of the Church. There are even those on the other side of the veil cheering you on. Believe in yourselves, place trust in the Lord, and you will raise righteous children and peace and serenity will be yours. That this may be true for each of us is my prayer.