

A Future & A Hope

*Talk by Randall Thacker given at the 2014 Circling the Wagons Conference in SLC, UT
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I feel honored to have been given the opportunity to speak today. Thank you Anne McMullin Peffer and the Circling the Wagons leadership for all you are doing to bring us together in a way that I truly feel can help us build Zion – a place where we seek to truly understand one another.

Two weeks ago I participated in a spirit-filled LGBT/SSA Mormons, Families & Friends conference in Mexico City where once again I met a variety of beautiful Latter-Day Saint men and women and their parents and family members who are navigating the complex intersection between their LDS Faith and their physical, emotional, and spiritual attraction to the same gender or their questions about their gender identity. Despite being in another language, culture and country, I saw many of the same stories play themselves out yet at times with even greater distress because of the heavy machismo culture in Mexico. I want to share a few stories about people I met at this conference which represent the stories that lead us to wanting to find some common ground to support these individuals.

One young man, an aspiring Opera singer who ended up performing two musical numbers at the conference, came with as much trepidation as I had when I first walked into an Evergreen conference in 1999. He is a glowing young man, one in whom you can see the light of the gospel shining brightly. It was his first opportunity of trying to see how he might reconcile his love of the gospel and the Church with his feelings and attractions to men. He stood up in a parent's discussion group and shared how his mother, even as a psychiatrist, continually made underhanded and hurtful comments about how "asceroso" or "gross" it would be to be gay. He knew that she suspected and made these comments in an effort to deter him and he was uncertain how to manage such a situation. With all his gospel glow you could also see the tremendous pain at times in his eyes. During the conference he had the blessing of meeting other parents who were there with their children which was very comforting to him. He later shared privately with me how prior to the conference he felt his world was "closing in on him" and how he was "losing hope." He said he was beginning to believe there was no future for him. He said, "I felt I had no options: I know I don't want to marry a woman, I don't want to live my life alone and single, and I don't want to break my covenants. What do I do?" In his words, "All the doors were closing in on me." So, what was my answer and what was it about the weekend that helped him feel some hope? I and others in the conference counseled him to be patient and gentle with himself and to get deeply in touch with his soul and to seek the Spirit and ask the Lord about his future. We proscribed no solution beyond self-acceptance, self-love, and provided community and a listening ear.

I met another man in his late 30s who after serving for many years in the highest priesthood callings he could without being married was told by a Seventy that “you’d be the stake president if you were married.” A few years ago he went inactive in the Church and eventually hit bottom with drug addiction and a life of what he called “lacking any form of holiness.” He came to the conference looking for some light and acceptance and some holiness and he found it. He explained how he had been living a double life for over a decade when he was serving in priesthood callings but as he put it, “How could I leave the faith I loved but also be denied the opportunity to be authentic and find the love I so desired?” Void of a place to process and some unconditional listening ears he instead dumbed down the pain through self-medicating. What was my answer for this man? Be patient and gentle with yourself. Allow yourself time to process things and seek deep inside you and from the Spirit the guidance you need. He shared and we listened.

I also met a mother who’s bright and beautiful 25-year old son had taken a bus all the way from Guadalajara where he is studying to Mexico City to attend the conference. The mother did not know her son was participating but someone informed her late on the Saturday evening of the conference. She drove 2 hours the next morning to Mexico City to retrieve her son during the devotional & testimony meeting at the Temple Visitors Center. Even after hearing the words of prophets from the Mormonsandgays.org website that were shared and individual testimonies of great faith in the Lord, this mother was convinced that her son must NOT be involved and that any talk at all about the subject would eventually lead him on a path to the devil and that we as participants were devils as well. You could see the pain in her eyes as a parent trying so very hard to JUST STOP ALL of this and put things back in *perfect order*. She had no desire to listen to any of us, including other parents. She threatened that she would take him out of school; make him return to his “pueblo” and see a psychiatrist who would once and for all “rid” him of this evil. The grief and heartache in both the son and mother’s eyes and face was almost more than we could bear. One of the other mothers present broke down in tears, concerned for the physical and emotional well being of the son and what would happen to him and of what kind of therapy he would receive. In one last effort to influence the mother, Kendall Wilcox and I approached her again and I learned a tremendous lesson. Kendall asked her, “How are you feeling right now?” She slowed down and we listened. She needed to know before we shared anything more that she was understood – that her intense pain and grief were understood. In the end, she allowed her son to return to school, yet he is seeing a therapist, which could possibly be a good thing.

Recently, I had a wife of a mixed-orientation marriage reach out to me asking questions about her husband’s questionable online behavior with other men and what I thought. I asked her what her feelings were and found that this was difficult for her to process at first – that she wasn’t completely aware of her feelings and what she wanted. I invited her to continue sharing and allowed her a space for being vulnerable. When I asked, “Well, what do you think you want to do?” she asked for my opinion and I said, “Only you can make those decisions.” I believe they

will work things out and remain a couple and I honor those decisions when made with complete self-awareness and transparency.

I also had a same-sex attracted friend who came to me and said he had met a woman with whom he really felt he was falling in love and said he thought he'd like to marry her. I told him that by entering in transparently to this relationship I would honor that decision.

I receive messages from Latter-day Saints around the world who are looking for a path out of a world that is closing in on them, who are trying to process out of confusion and into hope and who have great dreams of living productive and fulfilling lives that are consistent with their faith and heritage. They want to make contributions in the Church and want to be welcome, included, HEARD, and most of all UNDERSTOOD. They are hungry for a space where they won't be continually told there is only one right way. They want to be seen for who they are as human beings, children of God, and not defined by their gender identity, expression or their orientation – be it a diverse physical, emotional, romantic, spiritual, or sexual orientation.

And what are their future and their hope??? The majority of them want to share their lives with someone of the same or opposite sex who has similar values and loves the Gospel. Some want to do this with someone of the same gender yet they realize that entering into the relationship in most wards and stakes of the church would lead to being forced out and looked down upon by many members. For others, their dream is to make a marriage with an opposite sex spouse work and many do. Almost all of these people express how they just can't see why God would want for them to be alone if the opportunity presents itself for them to share and work through the school of marriage and relationships (be it same or opposite sex) because that school is such a purifying and edifying experience, one that calls for sacrifice and teaches the exalting qualities that come through working in a relationship with another soul.

Shortly after moving to Washington, DC I was in that space of figuring things out and had a point where I really hit rock bottom. And walking down the street one day I saw a sign hanging on a large concrete building that gave me hope and has forever stuck with me. It is from Jeremiah:

“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.” Jeremiah 29:11 NKJV

As a community I believe we can provide a future and hope – and as David Matheson said yesterday, he's found that it's “more important to be helpful than to be right.” I believe this is key to providing a future and a hope – without assuming that one particular way is the only way to find hope.

Among the most memorable parables of the Savior is the one about the younger brother who asked his father for his share of the inheritance and then through riotous living loses his money and his friends long before he could imagine. Eventually so deprived of sustenance, he became a feeder of swine and filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat.

Later the scripture says encouragingly, "He came to himself." We need to allow people to have this experience... He then decided to return to his father's house, hoping to be accepted into it at least as a laborer. The emotion and moving image of the father of the son who runs to meet him, and throws his arms around him and kisses him is one of the most moving and most compassionate scenes in all the Scriptures. It indicates to us how much God wants to have us back in the protection of His arms.

The older brother then enters the picture. He has been working diligently and obediently in the field, and returns from his labors. The older brother become angry when he finds out about the younger brother's homecoming celebration and does not want to attend. Therefore his father came out and entreated him. The picture depicts the story of two brothers returning home, though from very different places and this is central to this story and to today's purposes.

From the conversation and follow-up by the Savior we learn that the older brother lacks one thing that could make him a whole man and that is to have compassion, mercy and charity and the breadth of vision to see that the one returning who has lived differently is not his enemy or his opponent...but his brother!!!

Why is it that we compare our stories or the stories of others with those of our own or superimpose one person's story on others? God does not work that way. The father of the story does not torment the children by mercilessly comparing them. The expression of compassion and desire for understanding of one does not require you to remove or to deny that for the other who chooses differently. This father is divinely generous with both of his kids. He extends his charity to his two sons and listens to both and loves them both, and seeks to understand both.

One observer wrote, " In a world that constantly compares people, labeling them to be more intelligent or less intelligent than others, more or less attractive than the other, more successful or less successful than others, it is easy to believe that divinity does the same. "When I hear someone praising," the observer says, " I find it hard not to think that I am less worthy of praise, when I read of the goodness and kindness of other people, I wonder whether I will be so kind and friendly as them, and when I see trophies and rewards given to special people, I can not help but wonder why that has not happened to me."

But we must resist this inclination so embellished in the world as its horribly destructive to ourselves. Most of the commands that start with "do not..." are meant

to keep us from hurting others, but I am convinced that the commandment not to covet aims to keep us from hurting ourselves.

How can we overcome this tendency and see each other as sisters and brothers? First, we can do what those two children did and take the path back to the Father and let him come out to greet, hug, and kiss us, and lead us to the homecoming feast prepared for us. We as a SSA/LGBT LDS Community can prepare a feast that includes all of us.

“Behold, hath the Lord commanded any that they should not partake of his goodness?” Asks Nephi. “Behold I say unto you, Nay! But all men are privileged the one like unto the other, and none are forbidden.”

”Behold, doth he cry unto any, saying: Depart from me? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; but he saith: Come unto me all ye ends of the earth, buy milk and honey, without money and without price.”

“Behold, hath he commanded any that they should depart out of the synagogues, or out of the houses of worship? Behold, I say unto you, Nay.” *2 Nephi 26*

One way Satan deceives us is through discouragement and confusion. He does his best to get us to focus on our own nothingness until we begin to doubt that we have some value. He tells us that we are too small for anyone to notice; that we have been forgotten, especially by God.

We must live without this fear or envy of others' stories. Live with confidence. Know your truth. Always have confidence in the abundance of our Heavenly Father's love for all of us.

We know from modern revelation that, "The worth of souls is great in the sight of God." We cannot calculate the value of another soul just as we cannot measure the extent of the universe. Everyone we know is important to our Heavenly Parents.

I would like to ask all of you to stand up and every other row to turn around. Look at the person facing you directly in their eyes and see the divine in her or him. Give the person a hug.

Today, a feast been prepared, open arms are given, and we explore the ways to help give a future and a hope to this community. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.