

What's Love Got to Do with It? Conversations That Heal

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I relished my days at women's conference because I listened to many conversations—the conversations I was privy to while sitting at breakfast and the conversations I heard while waiting between sessions. Those conversations were healing.

One morning in the hotel at a breakfast table next to mine, four sisters were eating and talking about their children. I was anxiously checking my watch to be sure I'd get to the Marriott Center in time, but these sisters weren't rushing. I felt like tapping them on the shoulder to inform them that the opening session was going to start very soon, and if we didn't trek up there, we'd miss it. But they seemed oblivious to the time. They were talking over the difficulty two of them were having with their daughters, offering each other advice and counsel. I thought, *What a beautiful, healing conversation—right in front of me.*

Later that same day, as I waited for a session to start, I listened to many conversations about food. In all this listening, I've noted that Latter-day Saint sisters talk most about two things: relationships and food. I made some new friends at the conference talking about food. We compared notes about whether the mango yogurt was as good as the strawberry. We debated if the food line was so long that we had better leave someone to hold our place in line and go reserve seats with books

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and sweaters in the next session. I heard of a wonderful soup served in a restaurant in Montana, but I didn't catch the name of the restaurant.

The most tender, sweet conversation I heard was when I was high up in the bleachers waiting for Gladys Knight to come in. I eavesdropped on three sisters sitting behind me. (My friends will tell you I eavesdrop even when I'm with them.) One sister said, "I was in a session this morning, and three sisters kept talking and giggling. Do you know, I became so irritated that I was going to turn around and tell them to stop talking." Then she said, "But I caught myself and thought, *What would that accomplish? I would probably hurt their feelings.* And then I thought about the times when I have done the same thing—talking while others were trying to listen. You know, I learned something from that. It was a great lesson to me." The younger-looking sister commented, "I just love sitting with you. You always teach me something."

That was a wonderful conversation: an opportunity to teach and an opportunity to respond in a positive way. These are examples of healing conversations, conversations that remind me of a fascinating Latin definition of the word *conversation*: "turning around together."

Why do we talk in the first place? When you think about it, talking gets us into a lot of trouble at times. Revealing our thoughts and feelings can be a risk. We often wonder what the person we are talking to is thinking. Our internal conversation might sound like this: *What is she thinking about me? Does she understand what I'm saying? Why is she interrupting?*

Sometimes I wonder why we bother talking at all. Maybe we should remain mute like other creatures. Why did Heavenly Father grant us this astonishing ability to talk?

There are some people who choose to talk very little, and some not at all. Certain religious groups, for instance, take an oath to refrain from talking. Some people are mute from birth. Teenagers can be masterful at not talking when they want to give you the silent treatment. Sometimes we just don't feel like talking, so we go to our rooms, for a walk, or for a hike in the mountains.

This year I worked with a remarkable Jewish family whose nine-year-old son, Yasha, is mute, but he was not born that way. I learned from his mother about some of the experiences that account for why Yasha

doesn't speak. His father died two days before they left Russia for their new home in Israel. There, Yasha began to learn Hebrew. His mother, however, was very lonely, and things were not going well in Israel, so when a young Jewish man she had met wanted to emigrate to Canada, she decided to go, too. In Canada, Yasha had to learn yet another language: English. Because of these upheavals in his young life, Yasha now rarely speaks. I was able to get him to say yes or no. I tried to initiate a healing conversation with Yasha, a conversation in which he could know I cared about him. "It must be very difficult not to talk," I said to him, "because I'm sure you're talking in your head all the time." He nodded. "I hope I can hear some of those thoughts some day." He nodded his head again. When he left my office that day, I shook his hand and said, "Yasha, I look forward to the day I can hear you."

We are born with the ability to talk, but along the way some of us learn to fear what's going to happen when we open our mouths. Why do we talk? I offer you two ideas: We talk to exchange ourselves with each other—to share our thoughts and feelings, our deepest emotions—and we talk to render ourselves human. The ability to talk and to record our talk in writing distinguishes us from every other living creature. Talking identifies us as human beings, kin to our Heavenly Father. It's also the very thing that can make us most cruel and inhuman if we misuse it. If we characterize another person with negative labels, such as "You're evil," "You're ugly," "You're dumb," "You're lazy," we wound that person. On the other hand, if we affirm others with our words, we lift and heal them.

Let me relate two profound experiences of healing conversations in my life. I live in downtown Calgary where there are some lovely condominiums. As in most cities, however, downtown is also a place prostitutes frequent. One night on my way home from work at eleven o'clock, I stopped at the 7-Eleven. As I walked to the entrance, I saw ahead of me a young woman wearing high white boots and very abbreviated shorts—quite different attire from what I was wearing. We reached the front door at the same time, and she opened it for me. I walked through, turned to her, and said, "Thank you." She looked back at me with visible shock—for a simple thank you. Inside, I got my milk, and again we met at the checkout counter. Our eyes met and, in a way that truly was

not ordinary, we connected. I felt something for that woman, and I know she felt something for me. What I saw in her at that moment was the divine in her, and simultaneously I knew she was seeing it in me. As I walked out to my car, I couldn't believe the internal conversation I was having: *I wonder what she would think about Relief Society?*

Can you imagine? As I puzzled about it, I knew that thought had come to me so I would think about her in a positive way, picturing her in a different setting. And that thought led to other thoughts about her being a Relief Society teacher and seeing her for what she was—a child of God.

My heart ached for her as I wondered how she ended up in her situation in life, and I grieved over how different our lives were. Not once did negative thoughts cloud my feelings for this young woman. In that one moment, the Spirit had connected us. A simple phrase—"thank you"—had opened a door. I have found that if we yield our hearts to the Spirit, even our briefest conversations can be occasions for enlightenment and healing.

Another conversation illustrates this same truth. I was visiting my mother before I flew to Provo for women's conference. I usually visit my mother before I go out of town because my mother is in the final stages of a very debilitating illness. I want to have had a good conversation with her in case that visit is the last time I see her. One thing I have learned from life is that the best conversations occur during suffering. On this particular night, as often happens, I was helping a nursing assistant with the bedtime care. My mother is a quadriplegic and is able to move only her head, so I was helping turn her in bed. The young assistant this evening was by chance one of my undergraduate nursing students. When she finished helping me care for my mother, she bent down and kissed her. In the bathroom, cleaning up my mother's bath things, this young student turned to me and said, "This must be very hard for you" and then hugged me. That one sentence was incredibly healing. One sentence from a young person I taught in class nurtured me in ways that were much more significant than anything I had taught her. Healing conversations can happen all the time in our lives if we will only let them, only be open to them.

These two conversations were affirmative and affectionate.

Unfortunately, we have other sorts of conversations with each other from time to time—conversations of accusation and recrimination.¹ When someone hasn't met our expectations, when we feel that someone has behaved badly towards us, we begin to criticize and accuse: "You never come home on time." "You're always late." "You never bring me flowers." "You don't care about my feelings."

Words do affect us. Conversations can be toxic. Scientific studies are being conducted in the field of psychoimmunology to track patterns within marriages. These breakthrough studies show that our conversations actually affect our health. At some level, we all know that already. When you've had lunch with a wonderful friend, you come away feeling good, exhilarated, happy. In contrast, other conversations have left you with a splitting headache, or a sore neck, or an upset stomach. Conversations can either build up our spirits or tear them down.

Here are some general dos and don'ts, starting with the don'ts. Please, never ever, ever, ever, *ever* say to anyone, "I do not love you anymore." Even if your love diminishes for a husband, a family member, a friend, withhold saying so because that is the commandment upon which all others hang: to love our neighbor as ourselves. If you are not able to love someone at that moment, pray that your love will return. Pray that it will increase. Never ever say, "I will never forgive you," no matter how much your heart is broken, no matter how much you feel betrayed in a relationship. And please don't say, "I can never be my true self with you." It leaves the other person feeling inadequate, helpless, and ashamed. Instead, try to find ways to describe how you would like to be in that person's presence. Please never say, "I will leave you or divorce you if . . ." Relationships cannot build, you cannot have the Spirit there with you, if you are threatening to leave. Please do not say, "If you say that again, I will tell your father," or "I'll tell your bishop," or "I'll tell your friend." Threats create enmity and prevent any real conversation in the sense of "turning around together."

By contrast, here are words I believe we can never say enough, words we are taught by our prophets and our Savior to say: "I am sorry; I ask for your forgiveness." You can never seek forgiveness or give forgiveness enough. When conflict or disagreements emerge, we need to offer hope for resolution. Recently, a friend said to me, "I know we are going

through a difficult time, but I am confident we will work it out." What a beautiful, uplifting way to approach a conflict. What else can we never say enough? "Thank you. That was very kind, that was thoughtful, that was considerate." Or, "I appreciate you. I am grateful for you in my life." These sentences come from the Spirit. These words foster and invite love. You can never say enough, "I like being with you. I like spending time with you. I feel good when I'm with you." And finally we can never say or hear too often, "I love you—I love you, I love you, I love you." At what point will we have said it enough? I read the scriptures and find such answers as "a new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another" (John 13:34) and "bridle all your passions, that ye may be filled with love" (Alma 38:12). We can never say "I love you" enough.

Toxic conversations over a number of years with people we love, or people we had hoped loved us, can result in emotional suffering and illness. We must shield ourselves from such exchanges. After twenty-five years of marital interaction studies, University of Washington professor John Gottman has documented that politeness is the first thing that goes out of a relationship in difficulty.² Think of the many talks from our general authorities about kindness and politeness.

Professor Gottman also isolated four patterns of relating that characterize troubled marriages. One pattern is habitual criticism. (Criticism is even worse than complaining, which is also a less-than-wonderful trait to bring to a relationship.) Defensiveness and stonewalling are two other patterns that perpetuate trouble in a marriage. Fourth is contempt, which includes name calling, hostile humor, and sarcasm. Professor Gottman could actually predict the number of infectious diseases, such as colds and flu, that a spouse who had been treated with contempt would have over the next four years. The correlation is even stronger than the correlation between heart disease and cholesterol. Now, don't think that a phone call today that ended in a tiff with your husband will bring on colds for you both tomorrow. Long-standing patterns, patterns that characterize what *usually* happens in your interactions, are what define a relationship.

Perhaps the most useful finding from recent studies is that marital happiness depends on how we resolve conflict, not whether it is present

or absent in a relationship.³ Marriages that are happy and satisfying have a five-to-one ratio of positive to negative emotional interactions. What constitutes positive interactions? Smiling, touching, praising, commending—the healing conversations we have been talking about.

It is vital in life that we have with each other conversations of affirmation and affection, conversations in which we tell each other how much we care. I've been amazed at the conversations I observe among LDS women. I hear more conversations of affirmation and affection during church services on a Sunday than I hear all week, perhaps because church is a place where we express love, where we try to build each other up, and where we consciously invite the Spirit, the Holy Ghost.

The scriptures warn us against toxic conversations: "Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile" (Psalm 34:13). How do we do that? Keeping our lips from speaking guile and gossip can be a great challenge. In any intense relationship, differences will surface. Anytime we are close to someone, that person will have ideas that differ from ours. When we differ, how can we build up instead of tear down? How do we invite conversations of growth and change, of "turning around together"? How do we deal with our differences, disagreements, and conflicts?

One way is to be open. Anytime we are open in our relationships, our hearts may be comforted and "knit together in love" (Colossians 2:2). I truly believe that is what happens.

Another way is to invite the Spirit into our conversations. A young man with multiple sclerosis (MS) with whom I worked over several months came to see me again this fall. This young man is not a Latter-day Saint. He uses a lot of colorful language, at times more colorful than any language I've ever heard in movies. My students know my standards and often remark sympathetically after one of his visits, "Oh, Dr. Wright, listening to that language must have been so hard on you." But on one visit the coarse language disappeared. I had asked him a very simple question: "Do you have any spiritual or religious beliefs that are helping you cope with this illness?" He then told me a moving story of the death of his brother and the feeling he had had at the time that his brother's spirit had visited him. In telling this moving story, he did not once swear or use offensive language. Why? I believe it was because he

was talking about things of the Spirit. The interview continued, and at the end of our conversation, I said to him, "You and I have something in common. My mother has MS. I can relate to many of the things you are talking about." In the gentlest, sweetest tone, he said to me, "If there's anything I can do to help you, let me know." Aren't those healing words? If you invite the Spirit to direct your conversation, wonderful connections will occur.

The final suggestion I want to offer about dealing with differences and disagreements comes from an experience with my mother. It has to do with struggling to understand another's point of view. A few weeks ago, my brother and I wanted my father to have some much-needed respite, but my mother didn't want him to leave town. I kept trying to understand why she was upset, but she didn't seem to be able to tell us. Finally, she said to me, "I don't want to die without your father here." My mother is not LDS, but she talks about dying and love more now than she ever has her entire life. I tried to reassure her, "We don't want you to die alone; we all want to be with you." I finally understood her feelings when she answered, "I don't know what's going to happen to me when I die. I just hope my family has enough love for me to make time for me now when I am so ill." These conversations—when we speak of our fears, loves, and hopes—can invite growth and change in us. These are the conversations I feel greatly privileged to have had with my mother.

My mother was a businesswoman before she had MS. A willingness to share deep feelings and express her love hasn't come easily to her. Yet now she tells me she loves me all the time. We express our love for each other frequently. We wouldn't have the relationship we now have without MS, so I am grateful for MS in our lives. I'm grateful for the change it created in my mother and in me. It has taught me to ask for, and to create opportunities for, healing conversations and expressions of love.

A sweet, young woman illustrated for me how to create opportunities for healing conversations. As our ward Relief Society education counselor, she phoned to tell me she wanted to drop off some teaching materials. "I could get those from you on Sunday," I kept saying. "You don't need to make a special trip." But she insisted, "No, no, I want to bring these to you," and she came. She didn't have any teaching materials for

me. She had cookies. She also had a conversation of love and healing for me. "I'm moving from the ward," she explained, "and before I go, I just wanted to tell you how much I love you." That offered me an opportunity, didn't it? To tell her how much I loved her. I told her, "Since I have been in this ward, you have showered me with love." She's a twenty-seven-year-old young woman with some great heartaches over the health of one of her children, but she still had time enough and love for me. And as kindness invites kindness, love invites love.

Perhaps the most healing conversations are what we call prayer. Our sincere prayers are, without doubt, the most sacred, powerful conversations we can possibly have, and they will always provide healing, if we will only listen. These are the conversations that have brought me the greatest comfort in times of great struggle. I am grateful for such conversations.

Professionally, I have been astounded to learn how many research studies are looking at the effects of prayer on illness, although the term researchers use for prayer is "distant intentionality." Numerous studies are being conducted to see how prayer can influence the course of illness. What Latter-day Saints already know, but what astounds these researchers, is that when prayers are offered for individuals who are ill, even if they don't know that someone is praying for them, their condition usually improves.

Of course, the question always comes, What happens when our prayers are not answered in the way we would like? What happens when the illness isn't cured? What happens when the person dies anyway? What are we to think and do then? During my mother's long struggle with MS, I have wrestled with these questions. My recourse has been to go back to the Lord for more healing conversations. We must draw upon our faith to help us understand why sometimes our wonderful conversations with Heavenly Father don't produce the results we would like.

Clearly our calendar is sometimes not the same as Heavenly Father's. Many times in my prayers, especially when I'm suffering about my mother's condition, I wish I knew Heavenly Father's schedule. I wish I knew when the suffering would be over for my mother. To be honest, I think what I really want to know is when my own suffering will be over.

But while the suffering persists, I find I listen in conversation with my Heavenly Father more intently than I ever have before.

Many times our heavenly conversations are one-word prayers: "Help!" Do you ever pray like that? Sometimes it's even more ego-centric: "Help me!" We are taught that our prayers should include thank you, so I'm trying to be grateful to share my mother's suffering and be with her these final weeks or days of her life. I can learn something from this time, though some days I feel like I've done all the learning I can possibly do around this particular piece of suffering. But that isn't so, of course, and sometimes what we learn through our conversations with our Heavenly Father may not become clear until weeks, months, or even years later.

I'm grateful for my membership in this great Church and for those wonderful, healing conversations we call prayer. I'm grateful for the mistakes I have made in my conversations with others, for the humbling and learning that comes from mistakes. How I've had to grow and learn and change! I am striving to be more loving, for I know that in our loving conversations with each other, we truly draw closer to our Savior, who so often and in so many ways tells us, "Love one another as I have loved you."

NOTES

1. See Lorraine M. Wright, Wendy L. Watson, and Janice M. Bell, *Beliefs: The Heart of Healing in Families and Illness* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).
2. John Gottman, "Why Marriages Fail," *Family Therapy Networker* 18 (1994): 40-48.
3. See Howard Markman and Clifford I. Notarius, *We Can Work It Out: Making Sense of Marital Conflict* (New York: Putnam, 1993), 17. See also James M. Harper and Colleen Harper, "After the Honeymoon: Crazy Glue for Marriages," in *May Christ Lift Thee Up: Talks from the 1998 Women's Conference* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 263-76.