

## THE INTIMACY OF FATHERHOOD

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I—along with many men of my generation—was brought up believing that men and women are equally equipped to be parents. Many men like me feel a deep desire to be hands-on fathers who claim responsibility for many of the tasks that previous generations assigned principally to mothers; to not perform these duties for us is unacceptable. Despite these personal convictions, I have continually found it a challenge to achieve a fair and equal share of parenting duties; however, it is a goal that I remain committed to attaining. I am not alone in my desire or in the obstacles I face. I feel that a tremendous potential opportunity awaits today's fathers through seeking and achieving intimacy with our children.

The intimacy I describe here is more than showing our children love and affection. It is about being there: up to our elbows in the messy rituals of childhood. Many of the intimate tasks of parenting can be unpleasant: cleaning up urine, feces, or vomit; soothing a screaming child; arbitrating sibling arguments; or sitting up well into the night with a sleepless child. The intimacy that we may find there as parents intertwines with our life's most meaningful moments. Writer Michael Chabon describes intimacy as a father this way:

The daily work you put into rearing your children is a kind of intimacy, tedious and invisible as mothering itself. There is another kind of intimacy in the conversations you may have with your children, in your

quarrels, your negotiations and running jokes. But above all, there is intimacy in your contact with their bodies.<sup>1</sup>

I see one of the great struggles of Latter-day Saint men of this generation as achieving balance between domestic and ecclesiastical roles. At church, men are issued leadership and administrative callings, and these callings often compete with time to parent. This is especially true for young fathers, when most of us (and, in many cases, our spouses) are attempting to build a career. The Church, an organization that has devoted its public image to being centered on the family, reminds each of us that being a parent is “the only calling from which you will never be released.” And we are taught from our youth to “magnify our callings.” The Church’s ideals for fatherhood are generally very good, but I find them generally to be lacking acknowledgement of the need for intimacy as fathers mainly because of the ways in which Church service competes with our families for our time and attention.

Talks about fatherhood at church tend to have a different focus than what I have described here. In Church settings, I often hear fatherhood described in the same terms that are used to describe leadership in a priesthood organization. In October 2014 general conference, Elder L. Tom Perry spoke on this theme and made a list of responsibilities that constitute a father’s calling: administering blessings and ordinances, leading family worship, providing one-on-one visits with children, teaching children diligence and goal setting, and setting an example of faithful gospel service. Elder Perry also somewhat awkwardly suggests “being involved in helping plan vacation trips and outings.”<sup>2</sup> These activities are all important; however, I get the overall impression of fathers being visiting Church authorities in their own homes. These men’s spouses

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1. Michael Chabon, *Manhood for Amateurs* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 18.

2. L. Tom Perry, “Finding Lasting Peace and Building Eternal Families,” October 2014, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2014/10/finding-lasting-peace-and-building-eternal-families?lang=eng>.

will need to make most of the day-to-day family action happen, which means that they will also be relieved to let their husbands help a bit with the vacation planning. This father-as-visiting-authority model prevents fathers from developing intimate relationships with their children. But it can also hurt mothers. Surrounded by the immediacy and intimacy of motherhood, mothers may feel disconnected from the overall mission of parenting. President Linda K. Burton in the April 2015 general conference spoke of her husband coming home to her and their small children:

He always greeted each of us with a hug and kiss and turned many difficult and sometimes disastrous days into delightful daddy times. I wish I had been a little less preoccupied with the endless list of to-dos still to be done and had more wisely focused, like he did, on things that mattered most. I would have stopped more often and enjoyed sacred family time and would have thanked him more often for blessing our lives!<sup>3</sup>

Please do not misunderstand me; I want “delightful daddy times” too, but I also feel a moral responsibility to be a part of “difficult and sometimes disastrous days” in my children’s lives. I want to be there to nurture my kids not only because it’s fair to my wife, who would like to have more “delightful mommy times,” but also because that’s where I am likely to find intimacy with my children.

Though I often fall short in recognizing the opportunities for the intimacy that I aspire to, I can see clearly times and situations with my three young children where I have been privileged to have powerful one-on-one experiences simply by virtue of being present and attentive to their needs. I want to share a few of these experiences.

Since my oldest daughter began kindergarten in 2014, I have been the parent who gets her ready for school and to the schoolroom door or school bus. She has inherited my congenital aversion to hurrying, accompanied by a zest for established routine and puttering with books

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3. Linda K. Burton, “We’ll Ascend Together,” April 2015, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2015/04/well-ascend-together?lang=eng>.

or toys. In these moments, I am reliving the struggles my parents had with me. In her first two years of elementary school, we have already logged many hours of begging, cajoling, and threatening, often capped with a rushed arrival at our destination—frequently late. When she was in kindergarten, we walked to school, crossing the hills of Patterson Park overlooking the cityscape of downtown Baltimore, we trekked together through rain, sun, and snow. As we walked, our frequent standoffs would slowly melt away to companionship. At our parting each morning, she always needed to look me in the eye, wave, and say “Bye, Dad.” Now in second grade, she still does. I have arranged my schedule to do this daily task with all of its accompanying unpleasantness partially because it makes good sense for our family; but mainly I do it because it means that in these moments—before the cares of the world have separated us—she and I have this shared experience to bring us together.

My middle son is a willful four-year old with an active imagination for anything that is reminiscent of action heroes. In my current job, I have one weekday each week where I am home to be the primary caregiver. A centerpiece of our weekly ritual is that he and I do our family’s weekly grocery shopping trip. As many parents know, navigating little kids through grocery stores is made especially complex by product placement: sneaky ad executives, food companies, and grocery store managers strategically put images of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Star Wars on products from graham crackers to Tupperware and place the products at four-year-old eye level. True to human nature, my son wants all of these. In learning to grocery shop with him, I have had to deftly navigate finding the right motivators to get him through the shopping trip while not giving in to his demands to buy the many items that stoke his desire. As he and I negotiate weekly, we have built a meaningful interaction in a situation that may otherwise seem like drudgery. Instead, each of us looks forward expectantly to our trip to the grocery store. Again, after years of rarely buying groceries for our family, this arrangement seems fairer to my wife. More importantly, my

son and I have gained confidence in one another to accomplish the task and have grown in a sense of companionship.

My youngest son is now nearly two. During the first year of his life, I had more time than I did with his siblings to be with him and have now logged many evenings helping him get to sleep. The steps required to get him to sleep have varied over time, but during certain phases it has meant spending thirty to sixty minutes rocking quietly in the dark with him until his body relaxes and his breathing slows. This last winter on just such a night, as his body relaxed into sleep, I sat there rocking him in my arms. Slowly I became aware of the pattern of my breathing with our torsos pressed together and his head on my right shoulder. Perhaps it was the sensation of our shared respiration that awakened me to the profound spirituality of this interaction. I felt a connection to the Father of my spirit as I soothed my own child. This intimate moment was qualitatively different from how Mormon theology often describes godhood—where men and women create worlds to become parents to innumerable spirits. In this moment with my son, I simultaneously saw myself nurturing a child and being nurtured by an Eternal Father in a way that resonates deeply with the way I would hope to feel in a future eternal setting. Again, from a perspective of equal parenting, I was doing the right thing to share bedtime responsibilities. In this case, however, I gained much more than simply achieving parity. In a moment of holding his body close to mine, I gained a profoundly spiritual connection.

I chose these three examples from my own family occurring at different times during a typical day. When our lives are busy with too many competing demands, we don't have these opportunities with our children. Certainly, Church responsibilities are not incompatible with being present for our kids at these moments. Frankly, for most fathers, work responsibilities are more likely to crowd out opportunities for the intimacy of fatherhood than Church ones. However, in my life I can think of many Church meetings and tasks that have competed with my time for fatherhood. When I have spoken with local leaders about my

concerns, they have always been sympathetic and encouraging. Elder L. Tom Perry stated in April 2015, “It has never been more of a challenge to find a practical balance between employment, families, and personal needs than it is in our day. As a church, we want to assist in all that we can to create and support strong marriages and families.”<sup>4</sup>

I do not have a simple answer for the complex balancing act of competing needs that the Church and its families face, but I do have some ideas of ways for us as a church to rise to the challenge and help today’s working LDS fathers:

1. Valorize the nurturing capabilities of men: “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” states that women are primarily responsible for the nurture of children; importantly, it also states that men and women are *obligated* to help one another in these responsibilities. Church authorities’ talks, lesson plans, and manuals can make more explicit mention of men participating in the nitty-gritty of parenting kids and maintaining a household. At our ward’s Father’s Day sacrament meeting, multiple speakers talked of stay-at-home dads, dealing with kids’ bodily fluids, and comforting sad or tired kids. These kinds of stories need to be explicit in our teachings; they help guide my way as a father. Intimacy with our children, I believe, creates a pattern for how we live in the world and how we serve our fellow human beings.

2. Reinforce the message that men’s primary calling is at home: In our last ward, I served as a counselor in the bishopric. When a member of the stake presidency extended the calling to me, I immediately worried that the new calling would scuttle my attempts to equalize parenting and domestic work in our home. When I attended stake leadership meetings, leaders regularly told us to streamline tasks to relieve overburdened bishops. Although they verbally praised a lean administrative approach, these same meetings generally served to only expand the list of local leaders’ tasks. My bishop and stake leaders were understanding and responsive when I expressed concerns that the calling would crowd

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4. L. Tom Perry, “Why Marriage and Family Matter—Everywhere in the World,” April 2015, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2015/04/why-marriage-and-family-matter-everywhere-in-the-world?lang=eng>.

out my family responsibilities, but at the same time I wondered whether these leaders were able to protect *their* own time for fatherhood.

3. Minimize the frequency and duration of meetings: Our ward's leadership meetings changed when our bishop's family had a new baby. At this point all three members of the bishopric had young children in the home and our bishopric meetings grew shorter and shorter. At one point, we were meeting for only thirty to sixty minutes no more than three or so times per month. During this time, our ward began planning activities to occur at times when whole families could attend, taking into account children's bed times. This contrasted with stake meetings that, in my experience, always occur at 7:00 p.m., are seldom shorter than two hours, and often appear to be designed with the speakers and material to fill the allotted time rather than focusing the time toward a specific purpose.

4. Remind those tasked with extending callings to carefully consider the added strain that men's callings can place on their spouses and family: In the wards where I have lived, many of the time-consuming callings have gone to men with children under five. Many mothers with young children experience profound isolation and even depression, a problem that is only compounded by absent spouses. In my experience, these factors have been underappreciated in considering various men's suitability for time-intensive callings in the ward.

I have one final personal experience regarding the challenge of fostering intimacy as a father and how the Church can better model fatherhood. Many of my thoughts on this subject developed after I co-taught a parenting course in our inner city ward. At the time, we had a wise Relief Society president who felt that many of the families needed practical assistance in parenting, so instead of using the Church's Marriage and Family Relations manual, we used the LDS Family Services' Strengthening the Family curriculum. While the Marriage and Family Relations course emphasizes typical gospel topics, drawing intensively from general conference talks of the last half-century, the Strengthening the Family curriculum covers topics such as "communicating with love," "nurturing children," and "teaching responsible behavior." The course brings together scripture, quotes from

General Authorities, and information about child development and psychology. Regarding nurturing, it states: “Nurturing involves responding to a child’s needs in a kind and loving way. It includes nourishing (physical, emotionally, and spiritually), loving, teaching, protecting, helping, supporting, and encouraging.”<sup>5</sup>

As our class worked its way through the Strengthening the Family curriculum, it became abundantly clear to each of the moms and dads that it was not just the “needier” families of our ward that needed practical help in parenting; we all did. During the months where I taught and learned together with my class, I experienced powerful spiritual growth and learning. I felt that learning about parenting gave me new appreciation for gospel concepts, and that as I engaged in gospel teaching, my capacity as a parent grew. Comparing our course with the Marriage and Family Relations curriculum, it occurred to me where the Marriage and Family Relations course lacked depth: the Marriage and Family Relations manual explains principles of family life, drawing heavily from talks by General Authorities of the Church. Our male General Authorities experienced their family life through the lens of demanding ecclesiastical responsibilities while building busy professional careers. In the decades that these leaders were young fathers, gender roles generally divided men and women’s spheres, with women in charge of most domestic tasks. How much of the intimate details of their families’ lives occurred while they were present? What details and wisdom is lacking when talks on parenting are conceived by men who relied on their spouses to do much of the parenting? In the Strengthening the Family curriculum, I found it refreshing to have a curriculum put together by men and women from LDS Family Services whose daily work is to support parents in the practical aspects of their families’ lives. Perhaps, if we had more time at church to talk as men and women about what goes on in our homes, it would fundamentally change our realities.

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5. *Strengthening the Family: Instructor’s Guide* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2006), 33



I yearn for more talks from male church leaders about the one-on-one, frustrating, messy, intermittently glorious process of fatherhood. I believe that we can be doing more in the programs of our Church than father-son campouts, daddy-daughter dances, and occasionally bringing our kids along as we do our home teaching. Let's think more carefully about the necessity of each meeting or activity that competes with fathers' time to parent. Let's be less apt to assume that when we add another item to fathers' Church duties, everything will be fine because their spouse can easily accommodate a few more hours of single parenting in their lives.

Despite the tensions that I have outlined, I have benefited in many ways as a father because of the Church's influence. Many of the convictions I am expressing have come about *because* of my Mormon upbringing. Though I have never felt comfortable with the historical Mormon ideal of fathers presiding as benevolent patriarchs, the Church has taught me much about giving love and service to others. I myself have been nurtured by various male leaders, in the form of youth advisors, mission presidents, and bishops.

I hope to see this intimate face of fatherhood increasingly presented as the ideal of Latter-day Saint men. We are not visiting authorities presiding in our homes while most of the tedious day-to-day intimacy of family life goes on without us. Instead, we are entrusted with raising up God's children. The work is demanding, exhausting, tedious, and sacred. May we be an intimate part of it, engaging with this labor in a way that reveals to us the intertwining of our most mundane and spiritual acts.