

Welfare, the Crowning Principle of a Christian Life

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This address was given, May 1, 2003 at the BYU Women's Conference

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We are so glad you're here. Take just a moment and look around this arena at your sisters. Look at the array of colors, the gamut of outfits, the heights of hair. Realize that whatever you're doing, no matter your challenges or successes, *you are not alone!* You are part of a worldwide sisterhood. For two days we'll be spiritually fed. Then, with our tanks refilled, we'll return to our homes and our lives and, if our husbands have remembered to feed them, our children. We'll continue our divine calling as nurturers, feeding those around us. But right now, we are here to be fed. I am thrilled to be with you, and I rejoice in your goodness.

Maybe you're thinking, as I once did, that the topic of welfare sounds as exciting as high council Sunday. Maybe you're thinking we'll talk about canning peaches or dry-packing wheat. If so, you're partially right—these are part of welfare.

Maybe you're a little embarrassed when I use the word *welfare*, because that's how it sometimes makes you feel. But embarrassed is not a definition of the word. Would it surprise you if I told you the first definition for *welfare* in the dictionary is "Health, happiness, good fortune and well-being"?¹ It's the second and third definitions that refer to assisting those in need. Isn't it interesting that happiness *and* serving *and* being served are wrapped up in one

word?

Like Relief Society presidents across the Church, as Relief Society general president I have a responsibility for welfare. Let me share with you the story of a dear Relief Society sister named Kim Hak, who lives in the Ta Khmau branch in Cambodia. Her rural branch has about 280 members who live in a community with dirt roads, no sewers, no running water, and very few homes with electricity. When teaching at night, the missionaries frequently teach by candlelight. Sister Kim has been a member of the Church for about two years and has served as a Relief Society president for a little over a year. Under the direction of her branch president, she was asked to deliver rice and money to some of the families in the branch. She was accompanied by Elder Lindmark, a senior missionary, and others from the branch. Elder Lindmark shares this experience:

“Sister Kim does not speak any English and I do not speak any Kamair, but that’s okay, as you will see, because she knows what she is about. She pulled out this piece of paper with the names of the families we were to visit and then using hand waving motions, she signals for me to back up the van. Also using hand waving, I check to make sure she *wants* me to back up. She assured me with the nod of her head. From then on there was no problem—she would point and I would drive.”

“We went to fourteen homes that day. Each home had its own set of problems, and we knew we could not solve all of them with a bag of rice and 10,000 reel. But Sister Kim did know that the rice would feed the family for seven, maybe even ten days. And the 10,000 reel, about two dollars and fifty cents U.S., could help buy some vegetables or maybe some fish.”

“Sister Kim’s directions, or finger pointing, in this case, were flawless; she knew exactly how to get to each sister’s home. Now the really good part—she knew each sister by name, she knew the names of the children, and while we were in the home, her conversation with the family was pleasant and inviting. It was the conversation of a friend. You could see by her countenance that she cared for her sisters and these sisters, without exception, knew she cared for them.”²

President Spencer W. Kimball taught, “[Welfare] is not a program, but the essence of the gospel. *It is the gospel in action.* It is the crowning principle of a Christian life.”³ Sister Kim exemplifies the spirit of welfare. She knows it isn’t just a program. She understands that welfare encompasses both spiritual and temporal well-being. Sister Kim shared her love for the Lord as

she loved others. My hope today is that we will begin to see welfare with new eyes, that we will better understand *what* the Lord's Storehouse is, that we *each* have something to contribute, that we will realize that self-reliance is *not* just about having enough for yourself but about having enough to share with others.

When Joseph Smith organized the Relief Society, he called us to “relieve the poor” and “to save souls.”⁴ When we fulfill this mandate, we are living welfare. The bishop has responsibility to care for his flock and is assisted by the Relief Society president, who plays a critical role. They access the bishops' storehouse and the Lord's storehouse to assist the needy in a dignified way. The bishops' storehouse is a physical place with goods and commodities lined up on shelves. But the Lord's Storehouse—where “there is enough and to spare”—is what the Lord has placed in each of us (D&C 104:17). It is one woman making a difference for another. It is one sister offering to listen or talk with a sister who may be lonely. It is a sister developing a close friendship with the sister she visit teaches. It is you and me with our strengths, our skills, and our talents blessing the life of another.

We choose what we give to the Lord's Storehouse from what He has given us. Sisters, do you see the abundance we have to draw upon? What gifts have you been given that you can bring to the Lord's Storehouse? Each of us as a member of this Church has covenanted to consecrate time, talents, and resources to the building up of the kingdom of God. Our consecration becomes part of the Lord's Storehouse in our individual wards and branches.

We are humbled by the stories of sisters' contributions to the Storehouse. We are inspired by your goodness, by your service to each other, by your service to your families and communities.

Sister Sonia Duffles is the Relief Society president of the Anchorage Alaska Bush District, which encompasses thousands of miles of wilderness territory. Scattered across this land are small towns, many with only one or two Church members. Such a calling could be overwhelming.

Recently my counselors and I participated in an historic teleconference with sisters from the Bush district. Sister Duffles arranged our “meeting.” She sent each participating sister a phone card with a prearranged number to call. She asked Kay Root of the Bethel Branch, Tamara Furman from Cold Bay, and Jean Gabryszak from Yentna to share a message with the sisters over the phone. Some sixty-five sisters gathered in chapels or around kitchen tables. They held a

roll call, which stirred my heart. Each branch reported the number of sisters in attendance. It sounded something like this: “Cold Bay—one sister. Yentna—one. Nome—two. Bethel—ten.” There were also sisters on the line from Dutch Harbor, Dillingham, Naknek, and Kotzebue. We will probably never see these sisters face-to-face. Many of them have not met each other, but when we sang, “As Sisters in Zion,” it was clear—they knew each other’s hearts. I will never forget the love that filled the phone lines.

In her talk, Sister Root shared how Sister Duffles travels several times a year to the outlying areas, taking supplies and sisterhood. She explained to all listening how when her family moved to Bethel, they had very little money and their meager belongings did not even include pillows. A few weeks later Sister Duffles visited Bethel bearing a great big box of pillows for her family. How excited her children were to no longer have to use their coats to sleep on. Sister Duffles exemplifies the mission of welfare and Relief Society with her contributions to the Lord’s Storehouse. She is self-reliant; she knows her sisters and their needs; she follows the Spirit in serving them; she encourages them to do the same.

Sister Furman explained how sisters in the gospel have touched her life in many ways. She spoke of how her email address was given to a sister in Dutch Harbor who was going through a very difficult time. She said, “After visiting with her via email for about a month, I came to find out that we had been through many of the same things. We were able to share, encourage, and lift one another. I looked forward to her emails; her contact with me was at times my lifeline.” When these sisters, having never met in person, gave to the Lord’s Storehouse, both souls were filled.

We stock the shelves in the Lord’s Storehouse with mercy and charity in the shape of thoughtful acts and silent service. The Spirit will prompt you, for only the Spirit can let you know where you are really needed. You can see if someone doesn’t have clothing, but things that the Lord knows must be discerned by the Spirit. Not everyone needs a food order or a bag of pillows. A young mother tells of answering the door one day to find an older sister in the ward on her front step. She hadn’t brought a meal with Jell-O or even cookies. She asked, “May I come in and rock your baby?” This new mother was so thrilled that someone would love her baby as she did. The seasoned sister was grateful to have a child in her arms. Both the giver and the receiver were blessed.

The goal of welfare service is temporal and spiritual self-reliance. President Marion G.

Romney taught, “Without self-reliance one cannot exercise these innate desires to serve. How can we give if there is nothing there? Food for the hungry cannot come from empty shelves. Money to assist the needy cannot come from an empty purse. Support and understanding cannot come from the emotionally starved. Teaching cannot come from the unlearned. And most important of all, spiritual guidance cannot come from the spiritually weak. . . . Once a person has been made whole or self-reliant, he reaches out to aid others, and the cycle repeats itself.”⁵

Sisters, in order for the cycle of welfare to repeat itself in our families, we must actively teach it.

President Romney once told a story that illustrates the danger of doing too much for our children. There was once a flock of sea gulls in the seaside town of Saint Augustine. Although living amid plentiful fishing, these gulls were starving. Why? Generations of them had lived work-free on the fishermen’s discards. Thus, these gulls no longer knew how to fish; parents had stopped teaching these once-natural skills to their children. When the fishermen eventually moved on, the gulls’ lack of self-reliance threatened their very survival.⁶ “We fear many parents in the Church are making ‘gullible gulls’ out of their children with their permissiveness and their doling out of family resources. . . . In fact, the actions of parents in this area can be more devastating than any government program.”⁷

We received pointed counsel at the April 2003 general conference regarding parents’ and grandparents’ sacred responsibilities. Such counsel certainly extends to all of us who play meaningful roles in children’s lives. Yes, parenting can be overwhelming. Some of us are still waiting for that promised peace of the golden years! But by consistently and lovingly teaching the principles of welfare, we are teaching our children to fish, so that when we are gone, not only will our children eat but they will be able to feed others.

What must we do to cultivate an enduring legacy of self-reliance and service in our children?

We must teach our children to work. Elder Dallin H. Oaks said, “I know that relative poverty and hard work are not greater adversities than affluence and abundant free time.”⁸ Do we rob our children of their self-reliance by providing too much abundance and free time? Denying them the blessing of hard work? Have you ever heard someone stand in conference and thank their parents for giving them every temporal blessing they desired—for not making them earn anything?

My husband and I were blessed with parents who loved us enough to teach us to work, no matter how challenging we made it for them—which we often did! We had duties and little jobs. We didn't like a lot of those jobs, but we did them anyway. We worked hard in our home. I didn't think it was a blessing then, but I now know it is a legacy of priceless worth. We tried to give our children this same gift. Of course, by the time we finished, Jim and I were ready to write a book, *Free Agency and How to Enforce It*.

Yet surprisingly, after all those battles to mow the lawn, clean the bathroom, or get jobs working for others, our children regularly thank us for teaching them how to work. I know it is often easier to do the work ourselves, but remember the starving gulls and then consider the alternative. Work builds confidence, self-reliance, and provides skills to serve others.

We must teach our children to live within their means and stay out of debt. For more years than we can count, our family has discussed the hazard of debt around the dinner table. Our sons learned that credit cards get paid off in full every month, or they don't get used; that those who understand interest earn it; those who don't, pay it. President Hinckley has counseled, "Be modest in your expenditures; discipline yourselves in your purchases to avoid debt to the extent possible."⁹ Sisters, we must teach the value of frugality, money, and saving.

When my husband served as a stake president and spent time counseling couples with marital challenges, he would meet separately with the husband and the wife. In those cases where financial problems were a major concern, he would frequently hear this heartbreaking comment from the husband: "No matter how much money I earn, it is never enough." Sisters, does this describe us? I wonder if high maintenance mothers don't create high maintenance children!

We must teach our children to serve others. My parents taught us to care for others. Annie was an older woman who lived across the road. When her husband died, she became very frightened of being alone. So my parents sent my sister Joyce and me to take turns sleeping at Annie's house. Each morning we helped Annie make the bed and then we returned home, got dressed and went to school. This practice went on until she felt able to be alone. I was twelve; Annie was in her sixties. She helped us learn to make a mean bed; we helped her learn to be alone.

We must teach our children to value learning. I am grateful for parents who knew the importance of education and encouraged and sacrificed on my behalf. Our dear prophet teaches

that education can bring self-reliance. Our children need the advantage that an education provides.

These are just a few of the welfare principles children need to learn in order to gain self-reliance. I encourage you to be thoughtful and prayerful about what your family, what the children in your life, might need to become self-reliant.

So what *is* welfare and how does it work? Welfare is each of us bringing to the Lord's Storehouse the resources and talents God has given us so they can be shared to bless others. It is the building of self-reliance in ourselves, our families, and those we are called upon to serve. As the Prophet Joseph Smith said, "A man filled with the love of God, is not content with blessing his family alone, but ranges through the whole world, anxious to bless the whole human race."¹⁰ Remember, self-reliance is not just having enough for ourselves but having enough to share with others.

We had very little growing up, but I never knew it. It is a tribute to my mother and father, who were faithfully self-reliant. One Christmas Eve, my brothers and I decided to take Christmas to a family struggling to provide for their young children. Knowing full well that our finances were just as tight, my wise mother let us do this anyway. She must have known that what we would learn that night was worth far more than any gift we could receive.

As we went through the house looking for gifts, mother said, "Sure, you can take this; let them have some of that." We went to the freezer and took some meat. We gathered up oranges, bottled fruit, a loaf of bread, Mother's fruitcake. We went through our own drawers and closets and found one or two of our own special things to give. The effort was basic, but we cobbled together a little Christmas.

Even though I was only thirteen, I was chosen as the getaway driver because my brothers were faster runners. As we approached the family's house, I pulled the car up next to an irrigation ditch that ran alongside the road. My brothers sneaked from the car and ran to the porch with the box of gifts. When they placed it on the mat, the dog started barking.

The children swung the door open just as my brothers leaped into the ditch. Thankfully, it was empty! I'll never forget those little children squealing and dancing as only they can: "Santa came! Santa came!" With my brothers barely in the car, we sped off full of Christmas joy.

The inspiration for that Christmas excursion came from parents who consistently taught through actions. Years have passed, yet I still marvel that in the face of our own situation, my

mother let us loot the house for another family. She understood that our service did not have to be perfect. It only needed to come from our hearts. My parents' examples created a powerful bond between my siblings and me. Even to this day, we know that if one of us is down to the wire, we can count on the others to rally round us.

On another Christmas, when I was a sophomore in high school, we were the family in need. We had gone to town to do some shopping and on the way home were in a car accident. My father was taken to the hospital, leaving us with the sinking realization that Christmas would be slimmer than ever. There were things I had wished for, things that mattered to a high school girl: a felt skirt, a Jantzen sweater.

On Christmas morning we awoke to what we thought would be just another day. But there, on *our* front step was a box. Inside was a gift for each of us, and it was something we really *wanted*. We never knew who left those gifts. But after that day, we thought differently about the people in our town. Sometimes we give, and sometimes we receive. That is the circle of welfare.

King Benjamin candidly asked, “*Are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have . . . ? . . . O then, how ye ought to impart of the substance that ye have one to another*” (Mosiah 4:19, 21; emphasis added). Jesus taught, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40).

Welfare, true welfare, is simply how we take care of each other. It is a way we “come unto [Christ], and offer [our] whole souls as an offering unto him” (Omni 1:26). True welfare is all about the heart. It’s taking what we have been given and using it for someone else. And in the process hearts connect.

For me, Sister Kim, the sisters in the Bush district of Alaska, and our neighbor Annie are women whose hearts and souls have been offered to the Lord. For me, my mother was the essence of welfare—she offered her heart and soul to the Lord. She worked hard, prayed faithfully, served genuinely, and accepted gratefully. Will you join with me in singing my mother’s favorite hymn, “Because I Have Been Given Much?” Not only does it capture her generous spirit, to me it captures the spirit of welfare.

Because I have been given much, I too must give;

Because of thy great bounty, Lord, each day I live
I shall divide my gifts from thee
With ev'ry brother that I see
Who has the need of help from me.
Because I have been sheltered, fed by thy good care,
I cannot see another's lack and I not share
My glowing fire, my loaf of bread,
My roof's safe shelter overhead,
That he too may be comforted.
Because I have been blessed by thy great love, dear Lord,
I'll share thy love again, according to they word.
I shall give love to those in need;
I'll show that love by word and deed:
Thus shall my thanks be thanks in deed.¹¹

I am thankful to belong to a church that cares enough about me to teach me these truths. I thank each of you for what you bring to the Lord's Storehouse. I promise that as you live and teach the eternal principles of welfare, your capacity for self-reliance will broaden, many will be blessed by your contributions, and together we shall come unto Christ and become like Him. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

¹ *American Heritage Dictionary*, 3d ed., s.v. “welfare.”

² Personal correspondence.

³ Spencer W. Kimball, Conference Report, October 1977, 123; or “Welfare Services: The Gospel in Action,” *Ensign*, November 1977, 77; emphasis in original.

⁴ Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932-51), 5: 25.

⁵ Marion G. Romney, Conference Report, October 1982, 135-36; or “The Celestial Nature of Self-Reliance,” *Ensign*, November 1982, 93.

⁶ “Fable of the Gullible Gull,” *Reader’s Digest*, October 1950, 32; as quoted in Romney, Conference Report, October 1982, 133; or “Celestial Nature of Self-reliance,” 91.

⁷ Romney, Conference Report, October 1982, 133; or “Celestial Nature of Self-Reliance,” 91.

⁸ Dallin H. Oaks, Conference Report, April 2003; or “Give Thanks in All Things,” *Ensign*, May 2003, 97.

⁹ Gordon B. Hinckley, Conference Report, October 1998, 72; or “To the Boys and to the Men,” *Ensign*, November 1998, 54.

¹⁰ Smith, *History of the Church*, 4: 227.

¹¹ “Because I Have Been Given Much,” *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 219.