

BOUNCE BACK AND MOVE FORWARD

Resilience and Posttraumatic Growth

DEBRA: *Due to extenuating circumstances, we were compelled to have our last three children very close together in age, with only a year between each of them. As we anticipated the realities of this situation, we knew that we were in for some very intense, stressful baby and toddler years. While caring for two baby boys and pregnant with a third baby, people would praise me for my bravery. I would reply that I was more likely stupid than brave. I would then generally comment that I wasn't too worried about when the baby was young and immobile, but I was apprehensive about the baby beginning to walk—when I would have three kids ages three, two, and one, all of them walking and none of them reliable. I knew that was going to be when the trial amped up its energy something fierce.*

As expected, things were difficult once our baby girl was born. As Richard went to work each day, I was left with three very young children, each of them in different developmental stages yet all of them screaming at the same time for different reasons. As the littlest one grew and began to crawl and get into things, the stress indeed increased monumentally. Then it happened, the very week the baby began to walk—the very time for which I had been the most afraid—Richard was called to be the bishop of our ward. The blow was immense. I felt my husband

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had been stolen from me at the time I needed him most, and, in light of the specific timing, I knew that God had done it to me on purpose. Thus began a very difficult physical and spiritual journey for me. I will share more about this trial throughout this chapter to illustrate various principles of resilience.

We all seem to have trials in which we feel our world has been turned upside down; we experience the difficulties of the flesh, the imperfections of the mortal condition, and the struggle of human frailties. What happens when our spouse is diagnosed with cancer, multiple sclerosis, panic attacks, debilitating depression, or dementia? What happens when jobs, investments, or homes are lost? What happens if we can't have our own biological children, our children have special needs, or we lose one of our children to death? What happens if our spouse leaves the Church? Lehi declared, "But behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things" (2 Nephi 2:24). We seek to trust in the wisdom of our Father in Heaven; we seek to remind ourselves that all these things are for our eternal benefit. Something that feels devastating to us can be ultimately part of our Father in Heaven's plan for our growth, happiness, and eternal salvation. Elder Quentin L. Cook of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles encouraged, "Adversity should not be viewed as either disfavor from the Lord or a withdrawal of His blessings. Opposition in all things is part of the refiner's fire to prepare us for an eternal celestial destiny."¹

Yet, even with our best intentions and efforts to keep this eternal perspective in the forefront of our minds and to remain faithful and fearless, sometimes the burdens of life become overwhelming. Do we bounce back after a brief period? Do we find ourselves some months down the road feeling like ourselves again? Might we even find ourselves feeling stronger for having had the experience? Or do we collapse into depression, despair, and dysfunction?

In the trials that come to us in marriage, ideally we seek a partnered effort to support and strengthen each other. Yet, regardless of what the *We* does or does not do, the *Me* is critical, and as individuals we retain ultimate power regarding our own attitudes and behaviors. How we choose to handle our stresses and trials or to interact with our spouse during difficult moments—even when those moments stretch into years and sometimes decades—is entirely up to us individually. To maximize our own personal power to influence the relationship, we must foster and build resilience within ourselves. With each new day, we must do what we can to help ourselves and help our marriage. Research has found that how one perceives their relationship stress is related with their own external stress—that one’s own stresses or trials spill over into the intimate relationship and exacerbates one’s own relationship stress.² This means that how we personally handle our trials and stresses directly impacts the quality of our marital relationship.

In this chapter we address two major areas: resilience and post-traumatic growth. We discuss how

Reflections

Life hit us with an unexpected challenge the day our son was born. His umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck twice, so labor contractions deprived his brain of oxygen. As he developed, he was diagnosed variously as having ADHD, bipolar disorder, and Asperger’s syndrome. In adolescence, our relationship deteriorated as he struggled and acted out in increasingly defiant and disturbed ways. We came to know the adolescent therapeutic community and the juvenile justice system well. Through all of this we struggled to understand and to cope. This had dramatic effects on our marriage. Stress over our son’s issues and our differences of opinion about how to approach them exacerbated our own problems and nearly led to divorce. What we learned over these years was simply not to give up—either on each other or on our son. We made many mistakes, but we learned from our failures and kept trying. We tried to listen better, trust each other more, take each other’s perspectives a little more often, and prioritize the health of our marriage. Things are still not perfect, but just staying in the game—not giving up, keeping communication open, and keeping our faith—has made a difference.

Reflections

My mother and father were divorced when I was five months old. My father totally deserted us, leaving my mother to raise five young children. That required my mother to go back to school to get a teaching certificate and then work to support our family. That began years of babysitters and daycare centers for me. Needless to say, I had attachment and abandonment issues. I also had no male figures in my life. Not one. I knew my life's mission was to marry in the temple and raise an eternal family, and I also knew that I was inadequately prepared for marriage due to my upbringing. So I sought empowerment by learning all I could about how to have a successful marriage and raise a righteous family. I took college courses and attended conferences aimed at personal development. I read books and studied the scriptures. I sought healing through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, as well as by counseling with a therapist. Today, I have a very happy and successful marriage and a close, strong family.

to endure adversities and difficulties with personal resilience—the ability to maintain or regain positive mental health despite adversity. As we foster resilience within ourselves, we will have a greater capacity to endure the trials of life and bless the quality of our marital relationship. We also go beyond the basic bounce back of resilience and discuss posttraumatic growth in which we can harness power from the adversity for our growth and thriving.

Resilience

Our ability to press forward and carry on in the face of disappointments, discouragements, or trauma—or our inability to do so—speaks to our level of resilience. Resilience is generally understood by researchers to be an adaptive function in which individuals are able to maintain or regain positive mental health in the face of trial and adversity.³ Resilience is critical to our ability to navigate our lives and our marriages, for as we know, “it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11). Opposition will come—it does come—and it is with us even now. How are we handling it? We see an example of resilience in the story of Job in the Old Testament. He is tested with severe trial by losing his

Reflections

As an entrepreneur, the money was better than I could have made as an employee, but there was a cost. My business was inconsistent and my income unpredictable. I didn't often see my children. I was often stressed out. Unfortunately, I brought this stress home. My marriage suffered. I was impatient. I was sullen. I either spewed forth all my frustrations on my ever-listening and ever-loving wife or withdrew and retreated into my home office, trying to solve all my own problems. There were periods when I didn't talk with her for days. She began to complain about our lack of relationship. I made a job change and became an employee. I took a 50 percent pay cut. I would love to say that I became the ultimate husband and father. While I enjoyed the consistent income, I still often retreated into my home office when times were challenging at work or when my wife and I had a heated argument. My previous bad habits had followed me, and the ugly truth slowly emerged: the problems that I had getting along with my wife were not just because of my previous job! I later moved and entered real estate. In the recession, I lost a lot of money on bad deals and racked up a huge debt. Our relationship has not been much better. Because of the financial stresses, both my wife and I have felt like we can barely breathe. I am still impatient at times. While I don't yell, I still withdraw into my home office when life is hard. My tendency to avoid problems is magnified. Can I finally turn the corner and apply all the "lessons learned" from twenty-eight years of marriage? Can I breathe? Can I not run away from disagreements and love my wife no matter what? I certainly believe I can improve my marriage as I learn how to handle my own stress better. I committed to be "one" with my spouse, and I believe with the Lord's help we can truly become not just friends but "eternal companions."

Reflections

I grew up in a very troubled alcoholic family that very nearly took me apart emotionally over the years. Somehow I stayed the course and pushed forward. I think there was, in me, a certain level of natural resilience. Knowing who I am helps me to act accordingly, even when I am suffering. My wife and I have been married forty-six years and have children and grandchildren. We have faced some difficult challenges. I have tried to remember that I did it for years as a child and a youth and I can continue to do it if that is my choice. It is my choice and I will do it. When I face hard times, even now, I still cry and sometimes feel doubtful of myself. . . but then I ask myself to remember my journey. I remind my wife and family around me that we can and will be able to go on if each draws upon his or her own strength and faith and then decides to go forth. Hand in hand we do it. That is how it has helped me in marriage and family life as we have faced our challenges. The road is still bumpy but continues forward.

property, his children, and his health. He struggles, yet “in all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly” (i.e., he didn’t blame God; Job 1:22). He was then attacked through the shame and blame and bad advice of friends; they accused him of sin. In all of these trials, Job continued to press forward: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him” (Job 13:15; emphasis added). Job did maintain his ways before God, an impressive example of resilience despite a great deal of trauma. In the end, God speaks to Job and rewards his faithfulness.

Joseph Smith, as a prisoner in Liberty Jail, was also instructed of the Lord to maintain his ways: “Hold on thy way” (D&C 122:9). He was told that as he did so, the priesthood would remain with him and that his enemies would not be able to thwart his mission for God. The Lord counseled, “Fear not what man can do, for God shall be with you forever and ever” (D&C 122:9).

DEBRA: *To these examples, I will add more about my personal story. When Richard was made bishop, I was tested with isolation and was overwhelmed. As bishop, Richard had major responsibilities and stewardships for the ward flock, yet he was surrounded by a large supporting cast. I also had major responsibilities, but they were for our personal flock, and I was more isolated than I had ever been now that I spent many additional hours alone with the children each week.*

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Getting to church was a monumental endeavor. Emotional meltdowns were a weekly occurrence—for both the children and me. By the time I got to church, I felt emotionally exhausted. During sacrament meeting, even though friends were very generous to sit with me, the three little ones were young enough that they often would not let my friends help because they only wanted Mom. The meeting was all about child management, probably looking more like a wrestling match than a worship service to those sitting around us. I was embarrassed that we were so noisy. I fought back tears through many of those meetings in those early bishop years. In all honesty, sacrament meeting was the worst part of my week.

In spite of these dynamics, I really did do my best to do my duty with a positive attitude. Yet reality was that I was struggling with feeling overwhelmed and abandoned. I felt like I was drowning and expressed this to Richard quite often. This led to moments of conflict some Sunday evenings after Richard returned home from his bishop work as I expressed my feelings of exasperation after a long week with the children. We went to bed those Sunday nights with tension in the air. This negativity made it difficult for Richard; he wondered how he could possibly continue to serve as bishop when it seemed to be exacerbating problems at home. As he began to struggle, I began to see more clearly the importance of my Me contribution. I knew that when I struggled, Richard struggled, and it compounded his burdens, interfered with his ability to serve with the Spirit as a bishop, and diminished the quality of our marital relationship.

RICHARD: *Debra is one of the most resilient and gritty⁴ people I know, as you might have sensed from her story at the beginning of chapter 1 as she spoke of continuing a PhD after her divorce and while continuing to raise two small daughters. She amazes me at how she always gets back up when life pushes her down, utilizing strong determination to not be beaten and to do what she can to help herself move forward. Even knowing this about her, once I was called as bishop, I knew it was going to be challenging to manage the added ward responsibilities while also trying to find ways to support Debra and the kids during my additional absences. I could feel that Debra was struggling. She was truly trying to be supportive of my call, but deep inside she was having resentful feelings that she had been put on the altar of sacrifice in order for me to serve. I felt trapped between my calling and Debra. It's part of my nature to think about ways to support Debra*

Reflections

My entire childhood I was surrounded by divorce and devastation in relationships. My parents were divorced. All my mother's friends were divorced. Both of my older sisters were divorced. The only stable marriage I saw was that of the parents of my grade school best friend. My husband and I married at age twenty. Looking back now, I think, in part, it was to escape such instability in my home. When I am asked, with that history, how we have survived thirty-six years of marriage, I don't really have a good answer. Like running a marathon, I think I just put my head down and kept going.

and to alleviate her stress and burdens; I did extra things at home during the week, yet, in spite of these and other efforts, it wasn't enough.

One Sunday evening, after coming home to a frustrated and discouraged wife, we started counseling together. We identified some more things I could do to ease her burdens specifically on Sunday: I adjusted my Sunday schedule to allow for a return home immediately after church to visit and eat a meal with the family before going back for afternoon and evening appointments. This allowed Debra and the children to see me in the middle of the day rather than having to endure the whole day without me. Debra's feelings of abandonment were significantly diminished by this one simple change. I also limited my ward business almost exclusively to texting during the week, which eliminated the need for a midweek bishopric meeting. In addition to these changes, we also brought a babysitter into the home a couple of mornings a week for a few months, giving Debra a break for a few hours while I was at work. We felt the Spirit guide us in this. These adjustments helped relieve the pressure of the situation not only for Debra but for me, because now I came home to a wife that was not as severely overwhelmed. These solutions may not have been found if I had not been willing to examine my part in finding a way to support Debra. It allowed both of us to be more resilient in an otherwise difficult circumstance.

DEBRA: *These changes were big improvements, and I was very grateful to Richard for his flexibility, but of course, by virtue of having three children so young and close in age, it continued to be a tremendous and stressful undertaking. After some months of struggling along with my new normal, I had a dream. In my dream, I was on a large ship, like the Titanic, and as did the Titanic, the*



ship was sinking. I was on a lower level of the ship, sitting in a seat confined by a seat belt (such as if I had been seated on an airplane). The ocean water had risen so that I had to stretch my chin as high up in the air as I could in order to keep my mouth and nose above the water. In one moment, the water would rise again and I would drown. I felt intense panic. Then, in one “aha” moment, I realized that there was an upper deck to the ship and that I didn’t need to drown at that very moment. Immediately upon having that thought, I found myself standing on the upper deck of the great ship. As the ship continued sinking, Richard was moving quickly back and forth, assisting others, appearing not to see me. Yet I felt calm and patient, with no resentment of his work to help others now that I was no longer drowning myself. I knew I was still in danger as the ship continued to sink, but somehow it was okay. I knew Richard would eventually get to me, and I felt proud of him for his great service to others.

This dream prompted me to make some changes. I very consciously made the decision to stop saying that I was drowning. Using that word was negatively affecting how I was thinking about my situation. With that, I made some positive shifts. I chose to accept the time of Richard’s bishop service each week without resentment. I felt less distress about the calling and recognized that it was actually temporary

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and that I had not lost Richard completely. Richard soon began to feel less angst about coming home after serving, particularly if he'd been out late unexpectedly. This helped us feel more connected as partners in his service, instead of me just feeling left behind and abandoned. I still struggled managing the children on my own, but my distress was now focused on the very real difficulty of caring for the children alone rather than being upset about the bishop calling. Our marriage quality, which had significantly decreased in the first few months after Richard received his calling as bishop, began to improve again. Thus, I ultimately was able to bounce back. I realized there was much I could do to influence my own quality of life and the quality of our marriage, in spite of the unchangeable nature of the bishop calling. This change is an illustration of the kind of positive power and resilience that can come into our lives and marriages when we create more flexibility in our thinking and perceptions.

Strategies of Resilience

Resilience provides psychological protection, as it helps prevent negative outcomes following traumatic experiences.⁵ Those with higher levels of resilience are more psychologically adjusted, with fewer symptoms of anxiety, depression, and readjustment difficulties compared to those with lower levels of resilience.⁶ Thus, it is desirable that we work to increase our levels of resilience.

Building distress tolerance is a fundamental step to creating emotional reserves and building resilience. It includes self-soothing, distraction, and activities that increase positive sentiment.⁷ These can be particularly helpful to those who may be in a severe time of trial or what feels to them like a crisis in which they are struggling to regulate their emotions. Let's take a look at each of these techniques.

First, in a moment of heightened emotion, it is important to learn how to self-soothe. To calm the intensity of emotion, self-soothing strategies need to be able to be done at any time, generally not dependent on others or particular circumstances.



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In efforts to self-soothe, we can choose activities that appeal to each of the five senses:

1. What sights soothe you? A beautiful view of the mountains, stargazing, a lovely flower, looking through an art book, watching a candle flame flicker, a favorite movie.

2. What sounds calm you? Peaceful or inspiring music, the rhythm of drums, the sound of running water, little children laughing, humming a gentle tune, a favorite song.

3. What tastes soothe you? A smooth dark chocolate; peppermint tea; warm tapioca pudding; a good meal; sugary, cold cereal (one of Richard's favorite comfort foods). A cautionary note here: This is not about promoting emotional eating or bingeing. The taste is to soothe, not cope. If eating is a problematic area for you, do not use food to soothe but try herbal tea, mints, or gum, or skip this area completely.

4. What smells soothe you? A hot churro with its brown sugar and cinnamon, a favorite flower, a favorite perfume or cologne, standing outside after it has rained.

5. What touches calm you? A self-hug, the texture of your favorite fuzzy blanket, massaging your hand or foot, brushing your hair, taking a hot shower or bubble bath. (Deep breathing engages the body and is an excellent one to try here.)

Second, once the self-soothing has reduced the emotional intensity of the moment, we can choose an activity to distract us for a moment or a longer while from the distressing circumstance. This serves to give us a break from having to think about the issue for a few minutes. Here it is important to do activities that keep us busy or engaged. For example, we can call a friend, exercise, do yard work, or work on a project such as cleaning, organizing, scrapbooking, etc. After a period of distraction, it is often easier to go back to working on the distressing situation with more clarity of thought.

Third, in addition to using distraction to give ourselves a mental break, we should purposefully include into our daily activities things that will create positive sentiment and will offset the intense negative energy of the crisis. What do you enjoy doing? Do it! Examples may include listening to energetic music, playing an instrument, spending time with friends, reading a good book, playing games, learning something new, watching a movie or sports, working on a meaningful project, or going out to dinner with friends. When we are in times of trial, we would be wise to make purposeful efforts to do several activities we enjoy every day. Not only is this great for traumatic moments or stressful periods of time, but it is a general life strategy for optimizing mental health and feeling happiness and joy.

These strategies do not need to be burdensome or take a lot of time. We can do some of these while driving, doing chores, working, or other such activities when we may not have extra time. For example, after a tense situation with our spouse, we can easily take a few deep breaths (self-soothing) and then turn on some uplifting or energetic music (both distraction and positive sentiment).

Beyond examining the benefits of building distress tolerance, researchers have learned a lot about how to help us build resilience so that we, like Job, may maintain our

Reflections

After over twenty-five years of marriage, I have learned to accept my spouse for who he is—his personality, his value system, his way of looking at the world, his unwritten rules for living. I have learned to accept that sometimes he will be unable or unwilling to try to fulfill my dreams. I have had to muster a great deal of selflessness to put aside my own dreams when they have not been fulfilled. I do this better with certain types of problems than with others. Wishing things were different doesn't make it happen. Getting upset just makes the problem worse. I have had to look different directions to have some dreams fulfilled, but other dreams I have had to let go. I have had to work to make this a genuine gift of love, not an act of grudging, eye-rolling surrender.

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ways as we struggle through our trials. Factors that influence our level of resilience include

- Our perception of whether social supports are available to us.
- Our perception of personal control and the use of our time and energy in ways that will benefit us.
- Our ability to manage negative emotions and have positive emotions (as in our discussion above about the use of soothing and positive-sentiment activities).
- Our ability to use cognitive flexibility, such as in problem solving and acceptance practices.
- Our ability to engage in activities that are meaningful and fulfilling to us and align with our life values and priorities.
- Our ability to access our own social, emotional, or material supports (such as empathetic or financial supports).
- Our ability to face our difficulties, work through them, and share them with others; this is contrasted to avoidance or denial of pain and negative emotions.⁸

Many of these factors speak to orienting our thoughts toward health. Martin Seligman is known as the father of positive psychology, a branch of psychology dedicated to optimizing mental health and happiness in normal populations (as opposed to abnormal psychology, which studies those with mental illness). He has researched issues such as failure, hopelessness, and optimism for decades. He found that “even in the face of terrible failures . . . men and women [can] flourish rather than flounder” when they are resilient.⁹ Seligman found that people who persevere when they are faced with opposition tend to interpret problems as temporary (i.e., “this will be over soon”), local (i.e., “it was only that one time; the other situations worked out”), and changeable (i.e., “I can influence this situation”).¹⁰ In the field of psychology, this type of interpretation of life circumstances is addressed within cognitive theory; *cognition* is a formal word to refer to our thinking, and cognitive theory identifies how our thoughts and beliefs affect our emotions. Sometimes we get ourselves stuck into thinking errors, thinking traps, or cognitive distortions. Debra experienced such a trap.

DEBRA: *I felt depleted and thought that I could not handle my circumstance as a bishop's wife with three young toddlers who seemed to be screaming, hitting, destroying things, making messes, and making demands almost continuously. I told myself I was drowning and so I was. As my dream made me aware of this cognitive trap, I was able to liberate myself from it.*

As we become aware of any distortion, it is much easier for us to change those problematic aspects of our thinking. There are many different types of thinking traps. For example, all-or-nothing thinking is when we believe everything is either perfect or is a complete failure.

As you read the list of cognitive distortions in the margin, do you recognize any of these patterns in yourself?

For example, have you ever found yourself overgeneralizing, such as by using the phrase “you always” when upset with your spouse? In examining this, you can acknowledge that imperfect human beings are not consistent enough to always do *anything*. This can help you reframe the “always” to a more accurate “you often” or “you sometimes,” which can immediately deflate some of the negative emotional intensity of a difficult moment. We will need to work with ourselves throughout our lives, especially in our marriages, to avoid falling prey to our own pet distortions.

As we consider these aforementioned resilience-building factors, here is a specific

Other Cognitive Distortions

- *Magnification or minimization:* You blow things up or shrink them down, out of proportion to their actual impact. “Our world is over as we know it!” or “No big deal. Don’t cry about it. It’s fine.”
- *Emotional reasoning:* Your feelings dictate your reason: “I feel like a horrible wife, so I must actually be one.”
- *Labeling:* Instead of saying, “It wasn’t my best moment” or “That didn’t go very well,” you tell yourself, “I’m a loser” or “I am a failure.”¹¹

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self-help model designed to increase resilience that may be helpful as you evaluate how you are handling your own personal circumstances. It follows the acronym of THRIVE:

- **T**aking Stock: make sure you are safe and have what you need, take care of personal needs, face circumstances rather than avoiding them, and the like.
- **H**arvesting Hope: look to the future (more on hope in our following section).
- **R**e-authoring: change victim mindset into a survivor mindset and then eventually into a thriving mindset through pondering, writing, and other types of exercises.
- **I**dentifying Change: track your growth.
- **V**aluing Change: work through how the circumstances have influenced your growth and improvement, such as with gratitude and journaling (more on gratitude in our following section).
- **E**xpressing Change in Action: make choices to align your growth into everyday behaviors and attitudes.¹²

Gospel Principles to Strengthen Our Level of Resilience

The gospel of Jesus Christ teaches many principles that will contribute to a more resilient life. As seen in the THRIVE model, hope and gratitude are significantly related to resilience in the research literature.

Hope

In large measure, resilience may be synonymous with hope: an overall expectation that goals can be met. Researchers have claimed that hope may be identified as a defining attribute of resilience,¹³ that resilience is positively related with hope, and that both have a direct, positive influence on life satisfaction.¹⁴ LDS Topics online defines hope in this way: “Hope is the confident expectation of and longing for the promised blessings of righteousness. . . . In the language of the gospel . . . the word *hope* is sure, unwavering, and active. . . . When we have hope, we

trust God's promises."¹⁵ Elder Neal A. Maxwell explained, "Real hope . . . stiffens, not slackens, the spiritual spine. . . . Hope is realistic anticipation which takes the form of a determination—not only to survive adversity but, moreover, to 'endure . . . well' to the end (D&C 121:8)."¹⁶

The type of hope herein described is centered in our Savior, Jesus Christ. "Ultimate hope is . . . tied to Jesus and the blessings of the great Atonement."¹⁷ Thus, through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, we are able to build a resilient nature that is brought to us through the power of the Holy Ghost. Elder Maxwell outlined the relationship between the Atonement of Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, and resilience:

While so striving daily, we will fall short. Hence the avoidance of discouragement is so vital. So where is the oft and much needed resilience to be found? Once again, in the glorious Atonement! . . .

By applying the Atonement we can continue to access the other nurturing gifts of the Holy Ghost, each with its own rich resilience. The Holy Ghost will often preach sermons to us from the pulpit of memory. He will comfort us and reassure us. The burdens not lifted from us, He will help us to bear, thus enabling, even after we err, to continue with joy the soul-stretching journey of discipleship.¹⁸

These are wonderful blessings of hope. Indeed, researchers have found that hopeful individuals experience more positive emotions.¹⁹ As such, when adversity and trauma come to us, hope in the great power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ brings confidence and calm into our hearts and minds. Hope in our Savior is stronger than any feelings we may have of desperation or fear—if we will but believe. When our hope wanes, fear thrives, yet "God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7).

When it comes to marriage, hope in our Savior Jesus Christ is our anchor in the sometimes stormy seas of adversity (see Ether 12:4). This anchor will tether us to each other as spouses and to our Savior so "that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and

his mighty storm shall beat upon [us], it shall have no power over [us]" (Helaman 5:12).

Gratitude

Gratitude, the ability to respond with appreciation for perceived benefits or positive aspects of events, contributes to a resiliency of spirit. It is also an important personal virtue that will protect one's marriage. One researcher commented, "Gratitude may be a mindful awareness—specifically, awareness of how one's very life is held together through the benevolent actions of other people. Grateful people, on recalling a positive outcome in their lives, are mindful of the causal agents (namely other people, but also, for some, God or a higher power) who have acted in ways that benefitted them."²⁰

In psychological research, the relationship between gratitude and hope is strong. "Grateful and hopeful people may both possess the cognitive habit of savoring their life circumstances, appreciating fully the good circumstances that come their way in the past and the meaningfulness of the goal pursuits they undertake in the present."²¹

This savoring has been shown to be helpful as researchers have examined exercises to increase feelings of gratitude. Seligman and colleagues examined several strategies for increasing positive sentiment, including two gratitude exercises. They asked research participants to record every night for one week three things that went well each day and their causes. They also asked participants to do a *gratitude visit* in which they were given one week to write and hand deliver a letter of gratitude to a person who had been particularly kind to them but who they had never properly thanked. They found that keeping track of the good things that happened each day increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms for six months. They also found the *gratitude visit* "caused large positive changes for one month."²²

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DEBRA: *I have applied the principles of this research into my personal life and benefitted from it over many years. I modified the activity a bit, using it as a gratitude list I call my “happy list.” On an ongoing basis, I list the good things that I experience each day and include anything for which I am grateful—things that give me joy, peace, amusement, pleasure, happiness, contentment, and the like. Some of my more frequent entries include a hot shower, a good workout session, a smile or hug from one of the children, a visit with a friend, seeing deer in the backyard, a phone call from Richard during the day, a good therapy session with one of my clients, the positive feelings associated with teaching and presenting or receiving and giving service, watching the children play together, enjoying a beautiful view, dark chocolate and mint, holding one of the kids on my lap and reading them a story, and singing silly toddler songs with the kiddos.*

Looking for the positive things in my life each day and writing them down increases their positive influence, even as it increases the amount of time I attend to them. A smile or hug from one of my children can last only a fraction of a moment, but thinking about it and writing it down and then later reading what was written extends that smile well beyond the time it took to actually happen. When I have a particularly difficult day or am going through a trial, I work even harder to find positive things to put on my list. This helps me follow the dictum “always [return] thanks unto God for whatsoever things ye do receive” by gaining awareness of even the small things for which I am grateful (Alma 7:23). Doing this on an ongoing basis over many years has created a great deal of positive sentiment that has flavored my life for good—even through my difficult trials.

Church leaders encourage us to look beyond even the things we are grateful for and foster a grateful heart with an overall attitude of gratitude. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf taught that although it is important for us to identify our blessings frequently, we should be grateful in all of our life circumstances, regardless of whether things seem to be going well or not. He indicated that this is “a gratitude . . . of the soul.”²³ President Uchtdorf explained that when we are continuously grateful, we can feel peace even in the middle of our trials. Indeed, researchers have conceptualized gratitude as a protective influence, reducing

the negative effects of trauma, in that it encourages positivity and helps create positive outcomes.²⁴

Posttraumatic Growth

Every trial can be seen as a growth opportunity—if we choose. Rather than getting back to just where we were prior to a trial, we want to move and expand beyond it, especially in marriage. Seligman teaches people how to foster posttraumatic growth. He emphasizes that our ability to improve and transform comes from a “renewed appreciation of being alive, enhanced personal strength, acting on new possibilities, improved relationships, or spiritual deepening.”²⁵ As part of this training, Seligman encourages people to revise their trauma narrative to include not only the difficulties of their story but more positive elements, such as how they utilized their personal strengths during the trial, things they are grateful for, and what they have gained since the trial began.

DEBRA: *In our bishop scenario, I was able to increase my level of resilience and find more patience and calm, even though the difficulty of parenting five children, three of them toddlers, remained. The revelatory dream, as well as the practical solutions Richard and I implemented to relieve some of the burden, helped me tremendously. In an effort toward growth, I sought to utilize my strengths, such as spending more time teaching the children (rather than just supervising them) and doing service for others. I also sought to be more grateful for the times Richard was home, the health and maturing development of the children, and those people that were part of my life.*

With all of this, even though I had made peace with the calling for Richard, the calling still just made everything more difficult for me. I would comment to those close to me: “I know this calling is good for the ward; Richard is a great bishop. I know the calling is good for Richard; he is more connected to others and seems happier in his service. I do not yet know how this calling is good for me.” My limited vision illustrates the nature of our lengthy trials and the types of expectations we may have—we may not be able to see growth midstream but only when

the trial is over (posttraumatic growth). I believed in faith that this circumstance would ultimately propel me forward on my eternal journey, yet beyond acknowledging that I was more sensitive to the needs of others because of my own suffering, I could not see my own growth. However, Richard saw growth in me, even when I could not yet see it in myself. He saw me exercise my faith and receive answers to my prayers, he saw my grit propel me to try again the next day no matter what happened the day before, and he saw a major transformation in how I reacted to his time serving as the Lord borrowed him.

The Prison-Temple Experience

Traumatic and painful experiences seem to be common to us all. For example, one mother of a son with schizophrenia indicated that she wouldn't need to die and go to hell in order to know what it was like because she was already experiencing hell in life as she dealt with her son's illness. In some trials it is the case that we are standing before the gaping jaws of hell. The anguish and trauma caused by these trials are soul searing at its deepest level. Yet we have been taught that these types of experiences are part of Father in Heaven's plan for our exaltation; there is purpose in the hell we may be enduring, and often that purpose involves our experience and ultimate growth.

Posttraumatic growth is a fundamental doctrine within the gospel. We are familiar with the concept of posttraumatic growth through our study of Church history and the experiences of Joseph Smith while he was a prisoner in the Liberty Jail. The Lord revealed to Joseph Smith in the squalid conditions of prison that "if the very jaws of hell shall gape open the mouth wide after thee, know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good" (D&C 122:7).

And what good do these kinds of experiences do for us? Elder Jeffrey R. Holland explored the idea that we can receive opportunities for growth and revelation, as in the temple, while we remain in the greatest difficulties of our lives. He used this

example of Joseph Smith and taught that Liberty Jail can be called a temple because

you can have sacred, revelatory, profoundly instructive experience with the Lord in any situation you are in. Indeed, . . . you can have sacred, revelatory, profoundly instructive experience with the Lord *in the most miserable experiences of your life*—in the worst settings, while enduring the most painful injustices, when facing the most insurmountable odds and opposition you have ever faced. . . .

Every one of us, in one way or another, great or small, dramatic or incidental, is going to spend a little time in Liberty Jail—spiritually speaking. . . . The lessons of the winter of 1838–39 teach us that *every* experience can become a *redemptive* experience if we remain bonded to our Father in Heaven through that difficulty. These difficult lessons teach us that man's extremity is God's opportunity, and if we will be humble and faithful, if we will be believing and not curse God for our problems, He can turn the unfair and inhumane and debilitating prisons of our lives into temples—or at least into a circumstance that can bring comfort and revelation, divine companionship and peace.²⁶

In the midst of difficult circumstances, we know some days are better than others, but when emotions become heightened and the crisis of a moment leads us to despair, we encourage reflection upon the prison-temple concept of Elder Holland. He continued:

Through it all, *God is with us*. . . .

We are not alone in our little prisons here. When suffering, we may in fact be nearer to God than we've ever been in our entire lives. *That* knowledge can turn every such situation into a would-be temple.²⁷

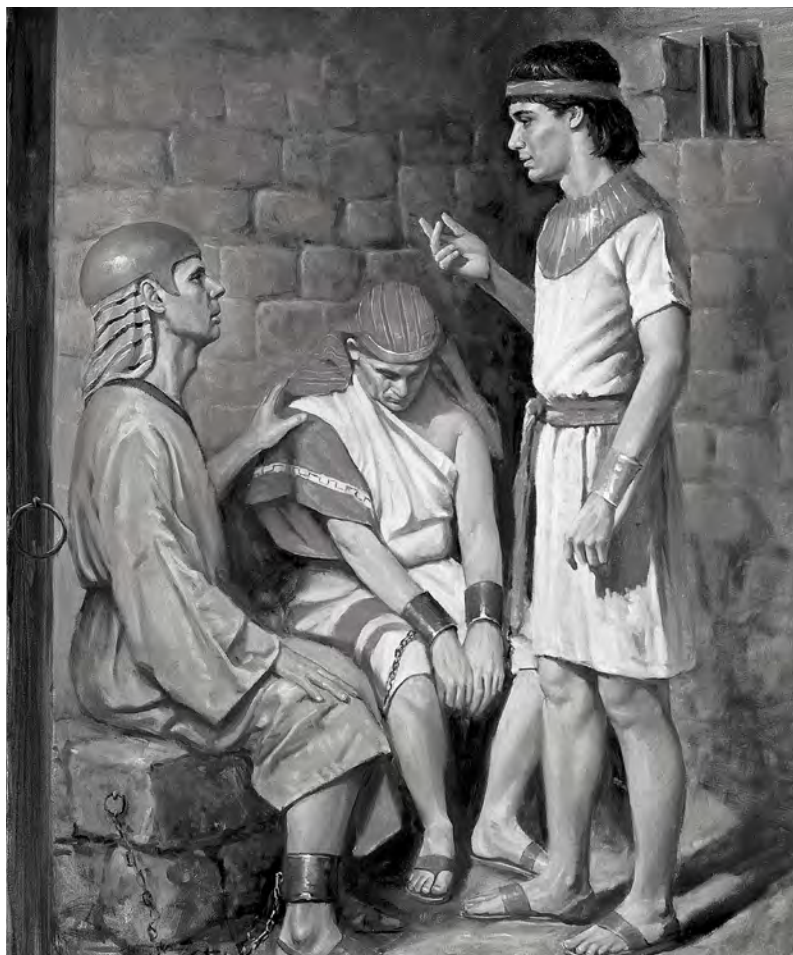
We can choose to reflect upon the trials and challenges we've experienced, even trials relative to a difficult marital relationship or a spouse's addiction or mental illness, and likely find, to our amazement, the realization of spiritual blessings that have come to us. As we do this, we find that the agony of the moment is set aside by the warmth and love of the Savior that is received by the power of the Holy Ghost. We can allow this great and soothing influence to witness to us that even while facing the very jaws of



LIZ LEMON SWINDLE, *Joseph [Smith] in Liberty Jail*.

hell, the Savior's love and His interest in our eternal welfare are ever present.

In trials, we are not simply subject to circumstances or to the agency of another, left without power to influence our circumstances; we are not the victim of our trials even when the refiner's



DEL PARSON, *Joseph Interprets the Prisoners' Dreams*.

fire is so very hot! We have the ability to exercise our agency to do that which does lie within our power. Viktor Frankl, an internationally renowned psychiatrist, spent many years as a prisoner in Nazi death camps during the Holocaust. Writing of his horrendous experiences being tortured, starved, and living on the verge of death, he observed, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."²⁸

Joseph Smith, counseling the Saints while he was in Liberty Jail, encouraged, “Therefore . . . let us cheerfully do all things that lie in our power; and then may we stand still, with the utmost assurance, to see the salvation of God, and for his arm to be revealed” (D&C 123:17). We see here the partnership required of us during our trials—we do what is in our power *and* we wait on God and trust in His saving power. We cannot just wait on Him without doing our part. We see this partnership in our Great Exemplar, Jesus Christ, as He revealed His experience of suffering as He enacted the Atonement:

Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink—nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men.” (D&C 19:18–19)

In his immense suffering, Christ glorified the Father and waited on Him while also doing His part as “[He] partook and finished [His] preparations.” What preparations are ours? What is the part we can play in exercising our agency while seeking to navigate our specific trial?

The story of Joseph of Egypt is a comprehensive story illustrating periods of growth following trial and adversity. Joseph was sold by his own brothers into slavery. In the house of Potiphar, he rose after that setback: “And the Lord was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man” (Genesis 39:2). This resilience created opportunity for posttraumatic growth: “And his master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand. And Joseph found grace in his sight, and he served him: and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he had he put into his hand” (Genesis 39:3–4).

A second trauma occurred as Joseph was thrown into prison by Potiphar—who had exalted him within his household—in reaction to a false report from his wife that Joseph had tried to seduce

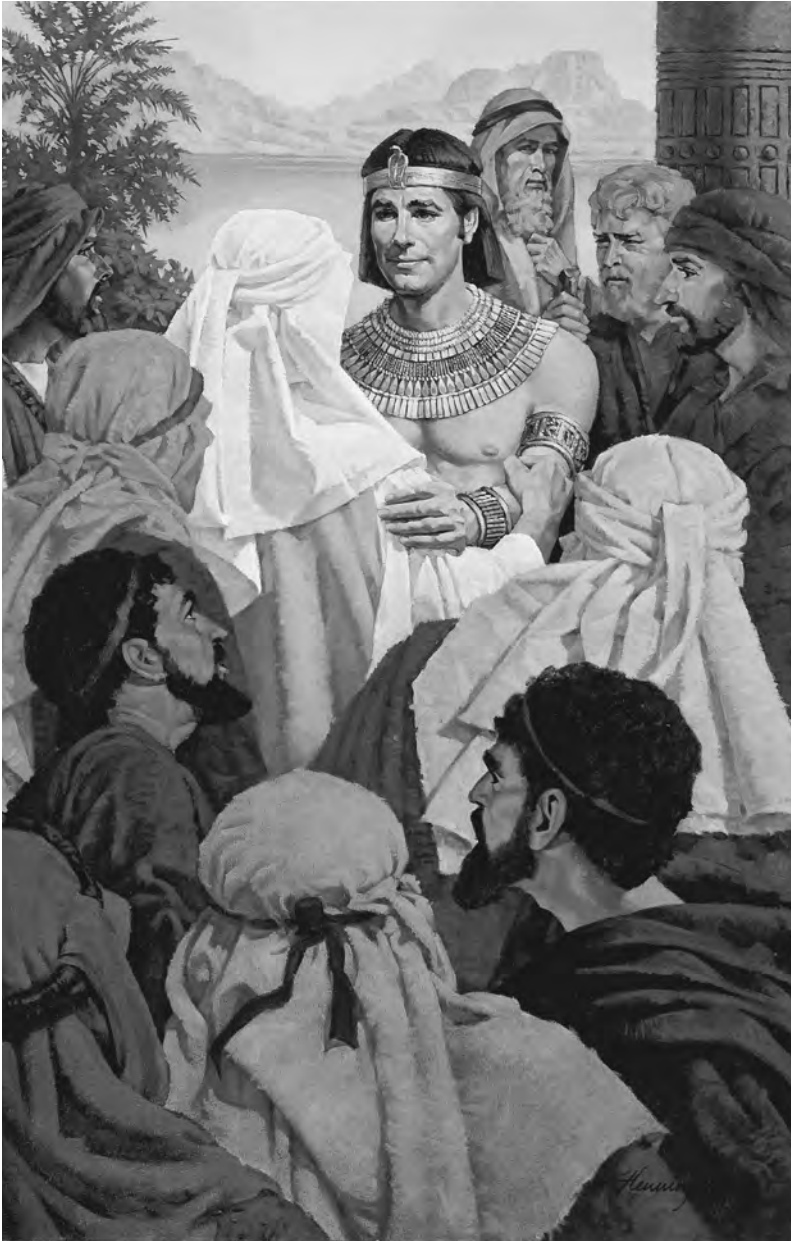
her. Joseph rose again and was made stronger: “But the Lord was with Joseph, and shewed him mercy, and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph’s hand all the prisoners that were in the prison. . . . And that which he did, the Lord made it to prosper” (Genesis 39:21–23).

Within the “dungeon” (Genesis 41:14), Joseph continued to extend himself and serve others by interpreting dreams. One of the men for whom he interpreted a dream was released from prison and later referred Pharaoh to Joseph to receive a dream interpretation. Joseph not only interpreted the dream, as God had blessed him to be able to do so, but continued to move forward, proposing to Pharaoh a grain-storage system for managing the dream’s predicted famine. And Joseph rose again: “Thou shalt be over my house, and according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled. . . . And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, See, I have set thee over all the land of Egypt” (Genesis 41:40–41). Joseph, who had been both a slave and a prisoner, continued to press forward and, as a result, was blessed with repeated periods of growth and prosperity; ultimately, he was given rings, fine clothing, and gold chains; rode in Pharaoh’s second chariot; was married; and served as governor of the land.

These stories and teachings may be summarized with these thoughts by researchers: “A biblical perspective on posttraumatic growth will therefore emphasize the outcomes of brokenness, humility, and deeper Christlikeness, rather than greater strength and self-confidence. It will focus on God’s strength or power being made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9–10), and how weakness is the way or key in the Christian spiritual life and not self-sufficiency that can lead to pride.”²⁹

DEBRA: *Let’s return now to my story parenting five children—three of them toddlers—while Richard served as the bishop of our ward. I had made much progress in my ability to bounce back and even move forward and was functioning well after those initial months. During this time, I worked hard to do all the*

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TED HENNIGER, *Joseph Making Himself Known to his Brothers*. © 1980 INTELLECTUAL RESERVE, INC.

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“right” things—I read my scriptures, listened to general conference talks, made extra efforts to be grateful for my blessings, fulfilled my church calling, sought to serve others, and parented our children to the best of my ability. But adding to the difficulty of the circumstance, other circumstances in my life began to unravel. It seemed that my physical health and everything around me was falling apart. A surgery; long-term, painful physical therapy; and a myriad of heart-wrenching and stress-inducing circumstances greatly intensified this period of time. Richard likened my experience to Nephi going on the Lord’s errand to get the brass plates but then failing in his first two attempts (see 1 Nephi 3:9–28).

Near the end of this intense first bishop year, bitterness and resentment began to grow. This bishop thing was the Lord’s plan, so couldn’t He have eased my burdens in some other areas and cut me some slack? I struggled with feeling that God was purposefully making my situation as difficult as possible without concern for my quality of life and personal feelings. I could see blessings from God in my life and cognitively understood that He loved me, but I could not feel it. I felt a numbness of spirit that I had never experienced previously, even during other significant trials. I prayed and prayed that I would be able to feel God’s love, but it did not come. I told myself I just had to keep moving forward in spite of this emptiness.

During this time, encounters with our stake president, a very loving and warm man, became excruciating because I felt he could see right through me. I wrote in my journal: “I cannot meet him—I cannot even look his way when he comes to our ward sacrament meeting and he is sitting up on the stand. I can’t look at him because I am embarrassed and pained to speak the truth of my experiences and life the last year since he put Richard in as bishop of our ward. It has been the worst year of my life. . . . I cannot speak the truth of my life to him because it will sound faithless and unsupportive.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, it wasn’t long before our stake president asked to meet with me. I was very nervous about this meeting, concerned about how to share my experiences and feelings from the past year in only a few brief moments without sounding like I was whining. Miraculously, and to my great relief, he spared me from having to attempt the task. When I arrived at his office, he did not ask me how I was doing, as would have been typical for his caring style—he already knew. Instead, he started the interview with a comment to the effect of “let me tell you why you are in here.” Wisely recognizing my struggle, he spoke to me about

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the “doctrine of prison.” I began to smile knowingly and remarked to him that we had written about this in our book, feeling somewhat shameful that I needed to be reminded of it.

After the meeting, I pondered our stake president’s words and reread what we had written here, realizing that I had failed to liken my own situation to the prison-temple. In this pondering, my feelings were confirmed: yes, on purpose God had called Richard to serve as bishop the very week the third toddler began to walk—he had put me in prison! Through the doctrine of the prison-temple, I realized that although he had put me in prison, He had put a great many people, even prophets, into prison as well—and there must be a reason for it. Surprisingly, this hard doctrine paradoxically brought relief from bitterness and resentment. Instead of feeling unloved or thwarted by God, I began to view my circumstance as more purposeful. I began to feel more faith and more hope.

This begs the question, Why would God put His beloved prophets in prison? And then, why does He put us in prison, too? One answer comes from the story of Alma and Amulek in the Book of Mormon as they went out to preach:

They were filled with the Holy Ghost.

And they had power given unto them . . . ; nevertheless they did not exercise their power until they were bound in bands and cast into prison. *Now, this was done that the Lord might show forth his power in them.*

And it came to pass that they went forth and began to preach and to prophecy unto the people, *according to the spirit and power which the Lord had given them.* (Alma 8:30–32; emphasis added)

In other words, God places us in prison in order to show His power both to us and others. This kind of spiritual power is available to all who seek to grow from their prison-temple experiences. President Russell M. Nelson taught:

When you reach up for the Lord’s power in your life with the same intensity that a drowning person has when grasping and gasping for air, power from Jesus Christ will be yours. When the Savior knows you truly want to reach up to Him—when He can feel that the greatest

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desire of your heart is to draw His power into your life—you will be led by the Holy Ghost to know exactly what you should do.

When you spiritually stretch beyond anything you have ever done before, then His power will flow into you.³⁰

RICHARD: *This prison–temple concept helped Debra, and it made a big difference in our marriage. I felt that Debra was much more settled even though none of the circumstances of her life had changed. This allowed me to have a more positive outlook on my calling and our marriage. I still came home sometimes Sunday evenings to an exhausted wife, but her demeanor and attitude were different and more positive. That was a big relief, and it increased the level of empathy and love in our marriage. Debra’s personal efforts to work through this trial with faith and resilience brought a sense of peace into our relationship that had a palpable and pervasive positive influence. I also sensed the spiritual growth and power that God was bestowing upon both of us. In this, Debra recognized the love of God and His approval of her offering.*

Joy

Our intention herein has not been to give a message of “gloom and doom” or perpetual suffering but to give a message of hope and encouragement. The Apostle Paul counseled the Hebrews: “Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby” (Hebrews 12:11). There is great joy available to us when we are “exercised thereby” as we seek purpose, focus on the Savior and His Atonement, and live according to our commitments. President Russell M. Nelson gave a discourse about the ability to find joy even in difficult circumstances:

Saints can be happy under every circumstance. We can feel joy even while having a bad day, a bad week, or even a bad year!

My dear brothers and sisters, the joy we feel has little to do with the circumstances of our lives and everything to do with the focus of our lives.

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When the focus of our lives is on God's plan of salvation . . . and Jesus Christ and His gospel, we can feel joy regardless of what is happening—or not happening—in our lives. Joy comes from and because of Him. He is the source of all joy.³¹

President Nelson later continued:

When we choose Heavenly Father to be our God and when we can feel the Savior's Atonement working in our lives, we will be filled with joy. Every time we nurture our spouse and guide our children, every time we forgive someone or ask for forgiveness, we can feel joy.

Every day that you and I choose to live celestial laws, every day that we keep our covenants and help others to do the same, joy will be ours.

. . . As this principle is embedded in our hearts, each and every day can be a day of joy and gladness.³²

DEBRA: *Several years into Richard's calling as bishop, I began to learn this very complex—even graduate-level—concept of having joy even while in our trials. As I dug deep, purposely working and grasping to access the real power that faith brings into our lives, I was testing the Lord at His word. It took some years, but, in time, that power became manifest. I received powerful, even miraculous, answers to help address some significant life concerns and health issues, as well as heavenly assistance in attaining some of the goals that were personally meaningful to me. The promises of God that I had read over and over again in the scriptures were coming alive in my life in a very real, life-breathing sense.*

A quiet sense of excitement grew deep within me. I knew God was doing His work in my life. Of course, I had known this cognitively throughout the trials, and I knew it from exercising faith in my full-time missionary work, callings, and other personal circumstances throughout my life. But through the severe intensity of the trials of these years, it manifested in such a distinct and powerful way that my testimony became secure at a level much deeper than what I had ever previously known. When the crises came and I held on tenaciously in faith, believing God's promises, He showed me that He would keep those promises for me personally. I felt a quiet joy and confidence rising up within me, knowing I had a very real, very personal relationship with my Father and that He knew me, heard me, loved me, and was actively working in my life to promote my growth and ultimate happiness.

Mental Health and Resilience

Sometimes, even with our best efforts, we can't seem to move beyond the devastating effects of life's trials or challenges. There may be extenuating circumstances beyond our control. There may be a particular knowledge deficit. There may also be complications caused by mental health issues. If you or your spouse continues to struggle to build resilience and move beyond trauma or other difficulties, we refer you to our appendix on mental health, presented in a question and answer format. This appendix discusses a variety of principles, such as how to identify mental illness, how the psychotherapy-treatment process works, and whether it is important to secure the services of an LDS therapist. Most importantly, it offers hope to those struggling—hope that there is help available and that healing and vitality can come with appropriate treatment. Included therein are several stories written by those who have attended psychotherapy. These stories illustrate the wonderful, liberating changes that came into their lives as they made the courageous decision to seek treatment for their difficulties.

Conclusion

Psalm 37:23–25 offers this comforting counsel: “The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord. . . . Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand. I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken.”

The doctrines of this chapter speak to our ability to do hard things, stay healthy while doing them, and grow and gain spiritual power because of the challenge. The principles of resilience and posttraumatic growth are critical as struggle comes to each of us. When these principles are applied, they will provide a well of strength that will influence not only our personal lives but

also our marital relationship. Our personal illustration woven throughout this chapter has sought to teach the critical relationship between our own personal trials and our marital relationship. Simply put—if we fall apart, so will our marriage. Yet as we foster resilience, our relationship can be blessed with a sense of security, peace, and joy, even if the trial is ongoing.

We have discussed a number of ways to help build resilience. Resilience will foster our ability to continue forward when the trials of life and the trials of our marriage test us. Keep moving forward, one step at a time. As we have seen with the examples of Job, Joseph Smith, and Joseph of Egypt, we too will be blessed by the Lord as we *maintain our ways*.

We can not only bounce back from trials with resilience but move forward by accessing the power of Christ's Atonement, fostering posttraumatic growth, and finding joy in the process. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland summarized the concepts of this chapter when he taught:

On this upward and sometimes hazardous journey, each of us meets our share of daily challenges. . . .

. . . The tests of life are tailored for our own best interests, and all will face the burdens best suited to their own mortal experience. In the end we will realize that God is merciful as well as just and that all the rules are fair. We can be reassured that our challenges will be the ones *we* needed, and conquering them will bring blessings we could have received in no other way.³³

The Lord, in His great love and mercy, will give us “beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness” (Isaiah 61:3).

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