

# Creative Father

“There is no home without love. You may have a palace and yet not have a home, and you may live in a log house with a dirt roof, and a dirt floor, and have there the most glorious home in all the world, if within those four log walls there permeates the divine principle of love.”

—David O. McKay<sup>1</sup>

Home sweet home! How good it always is to return home after being gone for some time. College students long to return home for Christmas after a lengthy and busy semester at college. Those in the military long for the day they can return home and embrace their families. Likewise, missionaries anticipate the day they can return home and rejoice with their loved ones. Truly, there is no place like home. The home is the place where wise parents teach their children “faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities.”<sup>2</sup> Home is a refuge from the storms of life; home is the laboratory of love. The late Elder Marvin J. Ashton of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles added that home should be “where life’s greatest lessons are taught and learned. Home can be the center of one’s earthly faith where love and mutual responsibility are blended.”<sup>3</sup>

Dollahite, Hawkins, and Brotherson have suggested that creativity is an attribute that strong fathers possess. However, creativity, in this case, does not imply that successful fathers merely conjure up or

fabricate activities and experiences for their children to participate in. Dollahite, Hawkins, and Brotherson have explained that “the responsibility and capability to create involve the call and capacity to meet a child’s needs through work that produces or procures resources and opportunities for the child.”<sup>4</sup>

Creating, then, suggests that successful fathers (1) provide for their families, (2) use their resources to create opportunities for their children, and (3) fashion an environment where their children can be successful. Such fathers are intentional and deliberate regarding their “creative” works and efforts. Moreover, such fathers help their children solve problems, and create opportunities for the growth and development of their families.

Strong fathers are men who create an atmosphere, provide opportunities, construct activities for growth and happiness, and forge an environment where their children can flourish. Therefore, creative fathering could include moving to a safe and healthy neighborhood, implementing a new and innovative idea for a family party, providing the material resources for piano lessons or a club team, or giving children opportunities to succeed in school.

Fathers can also help create an environment at home that is conducive to helping children feel safe and secure. Sometimes, fathers dream that they must provide a home for their children with tennis courts, swimming pools, and horses in order for their children to have idyllic childhoods. Yet disciples of Christ need not be reared at country clubs with a tennis racquet in one hand and cotton candy in the other. A spiritual environment in the home is what Latter-day Saint children need.<sup>5</sup> President McKay recommended that parents create a home environment with proper literature, music, and artwork. He also urged parents to teach their children to sing.<sup>6</sup> He further stated, “I know of no other place than home where more happiness can be found in this life. It is possible to make home a bit of heaven; indeed, I picture heaven to be a continuation of the ideal home.”<sup>7</sup>

There are simple things fathers can do in order to provide a healthy environment at home. Ronald Molen suggests that every home should have the following:

1. *A place to gather* where people can sit and chat comfortably. Maybe around a fireplace or a conversation pit. A place where family members naturally gather in order to relax and visit.
2. *A place to dine*—not just a bar where people grab their microwave dinners, but a place where the family can sit together for dinner and talk. Eating on the run or in front of the television leaves family members leading separate lives. Eating together can be a great time for sharing.
3. *A place to play and relax*. Children need a place where they can finger paint or create things with Playdough without getting into trouble. Children need a place where playing and creating is encouraged. Maybe there are murals or ladders, ropes, platforms, a fireman's pole. It can be a place that is colorful and fun. . . .
4. *A place to be alone*. Maybe it is a bedroom or quiet room where a child can read, think, study, build a model airplane, or do whatever else they want.
5. *A place to remember* might be an attic room, a dormer window, or a treehouse. A place for reading mysteries or adventure stories. A magical place that children will remember.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, President McKay suggested there are a couple of other necessary ingredients for a proper home environment. He taught, "A child has the right to feel that in his home he has a place of refuge, a place of protection from the dangers and evils of the outside world."<sup>9</sup>

David O. McKay was successful in providing such an environment for his children. The McKays were not a wealthy family. In fact, for most of their lives, they struggled financially. Many of David's letters to Emma Ray are filled with discussions on juggling finances to make ends meet.<sup>10</sup> However, they provided everything for their children that money could not buy.<sup>11</sup> Their home environment was conducive to the spiritual development, intellectual development, and emotional development of their children.<sup>12</sup>

## Creating a Spiritual Environment in the Home

President David O. McKay declared, “A true Mormon home is one in which if Christ should chance to enter, he would be pleased to linger and to rest.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, he urged parents to “make accessible to children proper literature, music, and appropriate motion pictures.”<sup>14</sup> David was concerned that many Latter-day Saint homes were not holding the interest of children; consequently, they were going into deviant places to be entertained. He taught, “Our homes should be more attractive and . . . more of our amusements should be in the home instead of out on the streets.”<sup>15</sup>

One way that David O. McKay demonstrated his creativity as a father was by reading and telling stories to his children. He would also take his children to see plays and other dramatic events.<sup>16</sup> His daughter Lou Jean recounted vivid memories of sitting on her father’s lap while he read the children “*The Lady of the Lake*,” *Ivanhoe*, and *The Blue Bird*. David Lawrence remembered:

[David O. McKay’s] diary for 24 February 1914 records: “With David Lawrence, Llewelyn and Lou Jean, I . . . went to the Theatre to see ‘The Blue Bird,’ a most beautiful drama by Maeterlink. Children enjoy the scenery and the children actors; the grown people, the philosophy.” *The Lady of the Lake* was a family favorite, sometimes continued over several tellings. We loved the poetry and the Scots dialect in which Father told the story. It’s hard for me to separate his telling it from the books that we later discovered on our own. I recall reading Walter Scott’s *Marmion* but without much enthusiasm because Father had never told us that story.”<sup>17</sup>

## Creating Fun and Making Memories

There were other ways President McKay “created” for his children and his grandchildren. One of his favorite activities was sleigh riding. Even into his eighties, he took the children and grandchildren on sleigh rides during every Christmas vacation. Lawrence related how fun it

was to see his father driving the children and grandchildren, wearing “his long thick raccoon coat and big gloves, beaming from ear to ear.”<sup>18</sup> When David’s brother Thomas was serving as a mission president in Europe, David wrote to him on 17 February 1939, “Did anyone tell you about the sleigh ride we had with our grandchildren, including their parents, Lawrence, Mildred, and Llewellyn? We had a glorious time—the joys of our youth were with us again!”<sup>19</sup> It must have meant a lot to David for him to even mention this experience in a letter. During the warmer months, David was also instrumental in organizing games of baseball and croquet on the lawn in Huntsville with his children and grandchildren.<sup>20</sup> As the President of the Church, he taught: “Every period of human life is wonderful; the irresponsible age of childhood, the thrilling years of adolescence and courtship, the productive, fighting, burden-bearing era of parenthood; but the most wonderful time of life comes when the father and mother become chums of their grown-up, successful sons and daughters, and can begin to enjoy their children’s children.”<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, President and Sister McKay had become great friends with their own children and took great pride and joy in their posterity. Being with his family was a source of great strength and rejuvenation for this busy Church leader.



*David O. McKay sleigh riding with his kids and grandkids. (Courtesy of Intellectual Reserve, Inc.)*

## Creating Poetry

Creating, of course, is not only limited to creating a healthy home environment. Strong fathers also seem to have the ability to think “outside the box” and are willing to take chances and construct activities and experiences that require that the greatest creative juices be flowing. They are the king of fathers who create a campground in the family living room, complete with tents and sleeping bags, or they take their children to the airport just to watch planes takeoff or land.

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In that spirit, another aspect of creativity in the life of President McKay was the poetry he wrote for his children. When his daughter Emma Rae moved out of the home and took a teaching job in McCammon, Idaho, David missed her so much. He wrote her:

Lonesome seems the home today, yet four of us are here!  
The sun is shining brightly, yet there's an absence, sure, of cheer!  
Mother—tearful—still is smiling, and the boys pretend to play,  
But home is not the same—now that Emma's gone away!<sup>22</sup>

On another occasion, David “repurchased” a violin for his son Lawrence. Lawrence had sold the violin to attend law school. David and Emma Ray bought the violin back and returned it to Lawrence, along with the following poem:

This viol I know isn't the best of its kind,  
But it's won a place in my heart and mind  
Which no Stradivarius can fill.  
So I've bought it again for connoted joy,  
And the tones it gave forth at the touch of our boy—  
I recall them e'en now with a thrill.<sup>23</sup>

This was the same violin that Lawrence played in his family's three-piece orchestra, where Llewelyn played the clarinet, and Lou Jean played the piano. The children frequently performed at family nights and on other occasions. Lou Jean related, “One of father's joys was to sit (sometimes for hours) and listen to the trio. . . . It seemed to relax him to listen to strains from *II Trovatore*, Schubert's *Barcarole*, Angel's *Serenade* or the sextet from *Lucia*.”<sup>24</sup>

## Creative Work Opportunities

Furthermore, David O. McKay's beloved Huntsville and Dry Hollow Farm always provided creative opportunities for him to teach his children to work and to be responsible. Every chance David had, he took one or more of his children and headed up the windy canyon road to Huntsville. In the summers, the family would move from Ogden to the

farm. By doing so, David did his best to ensure that his sons would learn excellent work habits. Many of David's diary entries record visits to the family farm and being with his children.

After Lawrence, Llewelyn, and Lou Jean left home, David and Emma Ray were still left with Emma Rae, Edward, and Robert. Because of David's duties in the Quorum of the Twelve, it was finally time to leave Ogden and move to a large apartment in Salt Lake City. Nevertheless, at the age of fifty-one, President McKay still maintained the farm in Huntsville to teach his sons Ned (Edward) and Bobby (Robert) how to work.<sup>25</sup> Even in his sixties, when most men would be facing retirement, David was working the farm and teaching his young sons to work. His 1935 and 1936 diaries record the following:

Saturday, May 4th, 1935, 'Office during the forenoon—Huntsville in the afternoon. Ned and Bobby accompanied me.'

Thursday, July 11th, 1935, '4:00 a.m. on the farm raking hay with Ned and Bobby. [The diary reports that by 8:30 he was heading to Salt Lake City, and by 10:00 a.m. he was in a council meeting.]'

Saturday, October 19th, 1935, 'In Huntsville with Ned, Bobby, and others digging potatoes on Dry Hollow Farm.'<sup>26</sup>

Saturday, April 11th, 1936, 'Bobbie and I drove to Ogden and Huntsville in the afternoon.'

Saturday, May 16th, 1936, 'Office duties in the forenoon. At 12 noon, Ned, Bobby, and I drove to Huntsville, and assisted Dale Newey in finishing preparation of five acres of land for peas.'

Saturday, May 23rd, 1936, 1:00 p.m., 'Bobby and I drove to Huntsville, and spent two or three hours working in Dry Hollow.'<sup>27</sup>

One of President McKay's beliefs was that the "real test of any Church or religion is the kind of men it makes."<sup>28</sup> Aside from the teachings of the gospel, David was convinced that teaching his sons to work hard would make them into hardworking and responsible men, fathers, and priesthood leaders. Many of his diaries are silent most of the year



*David O. McKay with a favorite horse.  
(Courtesy of Intellectual Reserve, Inc.)*

except for the occasions where he worked on the farm with his boys. They drove cattle,<sup>29</sup> worked with hogs,<sup>30</sup> shoveled snow, cut hay,<sup>31</sup> plowed ditches,<sup>32</sup> and planted trees, shrubs, potatoes, and peas.<sup>33</sup> His formula seems to have worked, as each of his sons attained marks of success in their home lives, in Church service, and on a professional level. It seemed that President McKay was the happiest when he was working with his family on the farm in Huntsville.

## Creating a Home for Grandchildren

Strong fathers and grandfathers are typically willing to create an environment that is conducive to build family memories and family fun. Many contemporary grandparents move into apartments, assisted-living centers, and even condominiums. One of the significant perks to such downsizing is zero yardwork and considerably less upkeep on the homestead. However, such dwellings are not always “kid friendly,” with little room to roam and few things to do. David O. McKay and Emma Ray came up with a solution to that problem.

After living in a Salt Lake City apartment for many years, they decided to purchase a home in Salt Lake City. It was a two-story red-brick home on South Temple Street. The home had a yard “where exuberant grandchildren could exhaust their pent-up energies and yet be near enough for grand-parental supervision—and enjoyment.”<sup>34</sup>

Here we see a family patriarch creating an environment in his home so that all could laugh and have an enjoyable time.<sup>35</sup> He was willing to create spiritual, intellectual, entertainment, and athletic opportunities for his family. As a result, these legacies were passed through the generations. They continue to keep the McKay family bonded together today.





*David O. McKay and grandkids around a piano. (Courtesy of Intellectual Reserve, Inc.)*

President McKay understood that family was his most important priority. Although he was busy, he made sure that he created memories, created opportunities, and strengthened relationships while he was with his family. In that vein, Elder Dallin H. Oaks shared an experience. While he was the president of Brigham Young University, he had a weekly coordination meeting with Neal A. Maxwell, the Church commissioner of education. Elder Oaks related that in one particular meeting, Neal Maxwell began by asking, “What should you like to be remembered for after you are released from your present positions?” Brother Maxwell then asked each person in the meeting to write their answer on a piece of paper and ponder it. As President Oaks contemplated that question, his mind traveled from Brigham Young University to his home. As a father, he asked himself, “When your children are grown up and leave home, or when you die, what do you want them to remember about you as a father?” Elder Oaks reported, “This question caused me to see that I was in danger of being remembered for

always being critical and nagging about trivial behaviors that irritated me, such as the practice of a teenage daughter who continually scattered her clothes and other possessions all around the house. I wanted to be remembered for fatherly communications of praise and love and other matters of eternal importance. Those are the communications whose memories have persuasive power.”<sup>36</sup>

David O. McKay understood what he would be remembered for as a husband, father, and grandfather. If there is one thing David O. McKay created more than anything else, it was family memories. He constantly worked on creating an environment in his home where his family and the Savior could dwell. He also built a situation in Huntsville where his family could connect by working and playing together. These creative environments provided havens of spiritual peace and happiness.

## Notes

1. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, June 1919, 78.
2. The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 2010, 129.
3. Marvin J. Ashton, *Ye Are My Friends* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 44.
4. David C. Dollahite, Alan J. Hawkins, and Sean E. Brotherson, “Fatherwork: A Conceptual Ethic of Fathering as Generative Work,” in *Generative Fathering: Beyond Deficit Perspectives*, ed. Alan J. Hawkins and David C. Dollahite (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), 31.
5. President McKay taught in a general conference, “Let us go back to our homes and see whether the spirit of our homes is such that if an angel called, he would be pleased to remain.” David O. McKay, in Conference Report, October 1951, 161.
6. David O. McKay, *Pathways to Happiness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 121.
7. David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals*, 490.
8. Ronald L. Molen, *House, Plus Environment* (Salt Lake City: Olympus Publishing, 1974), 41–46, emphasis in original; as cited in H. Wallace Goddard, *The Frightful and Joyous Journey of Family Life: Applying Gospel Insights in the Home* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 116–17.
9. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, April 1945, 144.

10. Diaries of David O. McKay, April 1906 to June 1907, MS 668, box 4, folder 1, Marriott Library.
11. President McKay taught parents that the great need in American homes is more religion. He further explained, "Parents should make it obvious both by their actions and their conversation that they are seriously interested . . . in the fruits of true religion." He also emphasized that discussing religion in the home should be as natural as employees in offices talking about golf, parties, and profits. See David O. McKay, in Conference Report, October 1946, 115.
12. President McKay taught that all children are entitled to three things: (1) a respected name, (2) a sense of security, and (3) opportunities for development. See David O. McKay, in Conference Report, April 1935, 113.
13. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, October 1947, 120.
14. David O. McKay, "The Greatest Trust, the Greatest Joy," *Instructor*, April 1964, 253.
15. David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals*, 485–86.
16. His children were extremely familiar with Shakespeare. See Woodger, *David O. McKay*, 94.
17. McKay, *My Father*, *David O. McKay*, 89.
18. McKay, *My Father*, *David O. McKay*, 70.
19. Thomas E. McKay Papers, MSS 1442, Letters Sent and Received by Thomas E. McKay and His Brother, David O. McKay, box 1, folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT. Hereafter, any sources from the L. Tom Perry Special Collections will be cited as LTPSC, Lee Library.
20. Horseback riding was another way he connected with his children and grandchildren. David L. McKay, interview by Gordon Irving, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Salt Lake City, January–May 1984, MS 200 734, 132, CHL.
21. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, April 1953, 16–17.
22. Llewelyn McKay, *Home Memories of President David O. McKay*, 174–75.
23. Llewelyn McKay, *Home Memories of President David O. McKay*, 179.
24. Francis Gibbons, *David O. McKay*, 63.
25. Keith Terry, *David O. McKay: Prophet of Love* (Santa Barbara, CA: Butterfly Publishing, 1980), 95.
26. Diaries of David O. McKay, January to December 1935, MS 668, box 7, folder 13, Marriott Library,
27. Diaries of David O. McKay, January to October 1936, MS 668, box 7, folder 14, Marriott Library,

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28. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, April 1949, 11.
29. Diaries of David O. McKay, February to December 1912, MS 668, box 5, folder 2, Marriott Library.
30. Diaries of David O. McKay, August to December 1915, MS 668, box 5, folder 4, Marriott Library.
31. Diaries of David O. McKay, January to December 1932, MS 668, box 7, folder 11, Marriott Library.
32. Diaries of David O. McKay, January to December 1937, MS 668, box 8, folder 2, Marriott Library.
33. Diaries of David O. McKay, January to December 1932, MS 668, box 7, folder 11, Marriott Library.
34. Francis Gibbons, *David O. McKay*, 188.
35. David and Emma Ray were also excellent grandparents. In their Salt Lake City home, they had the grandchildren over quite often. For Christmas dinner, the adults usually sat around the large kitchen table while the children ate their meals on several card tables. At one Christmas dinner, the adults were laughing and carrying on while the grandchildren, sitting at their card tables, wondered what all the fuss was about. One granddaughter basically said, "What were you laughing about? We couldn't hear it." Immediately, President David O. McKay changed the family tradition on the spot. He said, "Christmas is for the children." From that point on, the grandchildren sat at the large table, and the adults sat at the card tables, which they moved closer to the main table. Because of this, everyone could laugh together! See David L. McKay, interview by Gordon Irving, James Moyle Oral History Program, Salt Lake City, January–May 1984, MS 200 734, 132, CHL.
36. Dallin H. Oaks, *Life's Lessons Learned* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 61–62.