



Mal Berg Oveson reading her scriptures in November 2003

Courtesy Kristy Merrill, a granddaughter

# Growing Old Graciously: Lessons from a Centenarian

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As our mother approached her one hundredth birthday, we began to think seriously about her contributions to her family, to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and to society. In the process, we were particularly impressed that everyone has always loved her dearly and has always admired her attitudes toward life, especially in her twilight years. Within the last five years, as we assisted her in preparing an exhaustive account of her life history, we realized that our mother is the epitome of a person who has grown old graciously by reflecting courtesy and consideration to everyone. We soon saw the value of using her lifetime experiences as the basis for detailing lessons she has exhibited and taught about growing old graciously.

## **Lessons from Early Life**

Mal Berg was born on December 26, 1903, in Castle Dale, Utah, the fifth of seven children born to Carl Rasmus Engelbregt Berg and Martha Amalia Ungerman. Mother has always been proud of her strong Danish ancestry and credits her longevity to this heritage. She is not the only one of her family to live a long life. Her mother lived to be ninety-three, and four of Mother's siblings lived to about that same age.

Growing up in Castle Dale, Utah, was wonderful, our mother says. She tells us of the love her entire family shared one for another. As children, we learned very young how hardworking and dedicated to their family her parents were and how kind and courteous they were to their children. When we as children visited with our grandparents, we could

see these behaviors for ourselves. Mom was taught that having good work habits and working hard bring rewards. As a family, they raised all their food, whether fruit, vegetable, or meat. The children learned at a very young age to cook, can, wash, iron, and sew. Almost everything was done in the home, as there was not much money for shopping in the stores.

As we were growing up and being taught, Mom always encouraged us to be like her family—close, loving, kind, and courteous to one another as well as dependent on each other. She always reminded us of her desires through stories of her youth, and we recall those stories constantly today. One such story she loved telling is about graciousness through sharing. Occasionally, one or two extra eggs were available in the household of her youth, and one of the children was designated to go to the store and trade an egg for candy. Mom explained that on the way home, her and her siblings' temptation was great to sneak a piece before the "dividing up." She can still remember vividly waiting for the candy to come and then having everyone gather around the old dining table while the candy was doled out into seven piles before everyone took his or hers. She says it always tasted sweeter because no one had been left out. To this day, she counsels us to be gracious by sharing with each other in everything life has to offer.

Mom's family was very aware of the need to acquire a good education and often reflected on how blessed they were to live in an area that offered educational opportunities. This lesson was learned from their father, who interrupted his schooling at a young age to go to work to help support his family while they were still living in Denmark. Because of this limitation, Mother's father often sat with the children around the old dining room table in Castle Dale, Utah, in the evenings as they did their homework so he could learn to read and write English. Our grandfather felt it was very important that he learn good English and anything else he could glean from his children. In turn, Mom has always taught us to be gracious by teaching one another and learning from each other.

From our mother, we learned the positive outcomes of having dedicated parents who foster a loving, gracious family atmosphere; consciously shape and direct the lives of their children; and teach values to children as an outgrowth of scripture study and family togetherness. Her insistence on being involved in her children's lives continued as a dominant aspect of her life as she approached her hundredth birthday.

Mother graduated at seventeen from Emery Stake Academy, the equivalent of a high school. She was a member of the last class to

graduate from the academy. When she was a junior, the valley citizens learned that the Church was going to transfer jurisdiction of the Church schools to the state system. Her principal wanted to have a large graduating class that last year, so he told all the juniors that if they could acquire the appropriate number of credits during the year, they could graduate with the seniors. Mom was an excellent student, and she quickly fulfilled that requirement, graduating a year early at the age of seventeen.

After graduation, she accepted a job in Salt Lake City for one year at the telephone company. She soon found that living away from home and working at a job she really detested—to this day—was not as fun as she had pictured it when making her initial plans. After working for eight months, she wrote to her parents, asking if she could come home. In reply, she received a letter from her father telling her that they would love having her home again but only after she had fulfilled her commitment of the one year. This was a very sobering experience for our mother—one she has shared with us on many occasions. From this and similar experiences of our mother, we learned the lesson that commitments made should result in commitments fulfilled. Fulfilling commitments throughout her lifetime and our lifetimes has helped her and us be gracious by being at peace with ourselves despite our limitations.

### **Lessons from Marriage and Family**

Upon finishing her job in Salt Lake (Mom has always emphasized the fact that she quit on the exact day that marked the end of her one-year commitment), she returned home to find that her parents had decided they would send her to Brigham Young University. She was thrilled. She attended school for one year and then began teaching elementary school, serving in this capacity for three years before she married.

Her meeting and courtship with our father followed a natural sequence through the years prior to their marriage. Our father, Merrill Mahonri Oveson, was three years older than Mother and therefore had different friends. However, through the years of mission and schooling, they soon caught up with each other and found themselves in the same groups. Upon becoming engaged, they set about making plans for their future. Dad graduated from BYU and had to choose between two great opportunities. One was to move to Idaho to be a seminary teacher for the Church, and the other was to further his education at Oregon State University by obtaining a master's degree in agronomy. He and Mother made the decision together. Mom has made the point over and over that they spent considerable time talking through the pros and cons

and finally made the decision jointly to move to Oregon to attend graduate school. Mother knew that Dad leaned toward farming, as he had grown up in a farming environment. Farming was a deeply ingrained love of his, and Mom wanted to support him in whatever would make him happy—even if it meant leaving her home, her parents, and all her friends. To this day, she continues to counsel us that gracious behavior requires us to consider the wishes of our spouses, to carefully analyze decisions together, and to be willing to adapt lifestyles to meet the needs of decisions that have been jointly made.

In today's world, where a wedding with all the trimmings is such a big event, Mom has always lovingly spoken of her wedding day. The event as it transpired would be very unusual today but apparently was very normal for young couples in the 1920s. The day before their wedding, Dad picked Mom up at her home. She said good-bye to her parents at the gate. Dad and Grandpa Oveson loaded her one trunk into the back of Grandpa's Model T, the three of them climbed in, and they waved as they drove



Mal Berg in summer 1927

off to Price to catch the train to Salt Lake City. Grandpa Oveson got them to the train, said his good-byes, and returned to Castle Dale. Mom and Dad rode the train to Provo, where Dad got off to finalize some plans between BYU and Oregon State University. Mom went on to Salt Lake City, where she was met by her sister, Leone, with whom she spent the night. Dad followed on the next train and was met by his sister, Nora, with whom he spent the night.

The following morning at 8 A.M., Mom and Dad met at the temple. Mom received her endowment, and they were then married. No one was with them except Dad's great-aunt, who was a temple worker. Mom remembers leaving the temple around 3 P.M., going out for a very nice dinner, and then retiring to the Hotel Utah for the night. The following morning they left by train to Oregon, where they lived for the next forty years. Mother continues to emphasize that growing old graciously involves the scriptural injunction to leave father and mother, cleave unto each other, and "be one flesh" (see Matthew 19:5).

Corvallis, Oregon, was home for our father and mother for the next two years. While Dad attended classes and studied, Mom learned to live on seventy-five dollars a month. This amount covered their rent, school supplies, food, and entertainment. Mom had five dollars a week

for food, and she learned very early how to plan and make do. Through much trial and error, she became a marvelous cook and manager, and we all delight to listen to her tell of those early years. She and Dad made close, lifelong friends who were in the same financial straits as they were; working together, they created their own entertainment. We have heard wonderful stories of their canoeing, bicycling, hiking, and getting together to pool leftovers for fun dinners followed by board games or good conversation. As a family, all of us have emulated our parents' thrifty ways when necessary, and we continue to get together frequently as a reflection of our mother's insistence that we share life's experiences with each other.

Upon receiving his master's degree, Dad was offered a job on an agricultural experiment station in the central part of Oregon in a small, rural farming town called Moro. Mom recalls the first morning she awoke in Moro as one of quiet misgivings. She said she awoke and looked out the window and saw nothing but open space full of brown dirt. She wondered just what kind of a place Dad had brought her to. However, during the twenty years they lived in this small town, they became pillars of the community. Friendships continue to this day, even though most of those who were their closest friends have now passed away. Mom always speaks very lovingly of Moro and how she often misses those open spaces where she watched the cycle of wheat growing from green shoots to golden brown, of wheat being harvested, and of the land returning again to brown dirt. It was during those years in Moro that Mom and Dad were blessed with four children. Life was sweet.

The main drawback of living in Moro was a total lack of Latter-day Saints beyond our immediate family. We were the only members for miles. The closest branch was in The Dalles, Oregon, forty miles away, and that branch was not formed until after Mom and Dad had lived in Moro for several years. During the years of World War II, with our growing up without any organized religion and with gas rationing prohibiting the drive to The Dalles every Sunday, Dad asked for and received permission from the mission president in Portland to hold our own "home Sunday School." That decision turned out to be the single thing that did the most to cement our family together in the gospel. From this beginning, we as a family have moved on to our parents serving a mission together, two sons serving foreign missions, all four children marrying in the temple, two sons serving as mission presidents, two daughters serving in numerous ward and stake callings, one daughter serving a temple mission, and one son serving as a member of the Second Quorum of the Seventy. Our parents had great

wisdom and the strength to go forth and do those things they had been taught in the homes of their youth. Obviously, we feel that the things they taught in their home pointed the way to grow old graciously—by making the gospel and the Church a part of our lives no matter where we are or what we are doing.

In August 1947, our family experienced an unforgettable tragedy. Our home burned completely, and we lost everything we owned. Mom has told us since just how difficult this tragedy was for her. The small town of Moro quickly surrounded us and showered us with love and help. This help came in the form of replacing items that were needed to begin again—furniture, clothes, kitchen items, bedding, and so forth. It was overwhelming to us to witness the outpouring of goods that we needed. Mom expressed her hesitation in accepting all this outpouring of love through donations in our behalf, but she realized that the items were really needed and that they were given with much love and sincerity. We learned a great lesson in graciousness—that while it is greater to give than to receive, some situations require the receiver to allow the giver the opportunity of blessings by receiving graciously. Mom has items in her kitchen today that she received on that occasion. From this experience, our parents, especially our mother, taught us a lesson that has endured to this day—being a gracious receiver is just as important as being a gracious giver.

In 1948, our father was offered a significant promotion from Oregon State University and simultaneously offered related agronomy work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. These offers required us to move to the experiment station in Pendleton, Oregon, where Dad did experimental agronomy work for Oregon State and the USDA. However, the primary deciding factor for our parents to accept the move was the simple fact that Pendleton had a small Church ward and that we would have the opportunity to share the gospel with others and participate in more Church activities. With mixed emotions, we left Moro—after twenty years for our parents—and started over. This was a sacrifice that Mom



The Oveson family in 1945 (clockwise): Merrill, age forty-three; Dick, fifteen; Mal, forty; Joan, twelve; Mary, six; Stephen, eight

and Dad made mainly for our sakes. We were welcomed with open arms in Pendleton, and Mom and Dad soon had Church callings with major responsibilities.

At one point, Dad and Mom were serving in stake leadership positions, and they had to travel a great deal in fulfilling Church assignments on weekends. Our stake center was located in LaGrande, Oregon, sixty miles from Pendleton; and the stake area was even larger, extending to Baker, Oregon, and up into the Wallowa Mountains. Travel requirements resulted in no serious accidents but did result in faith-building experiences for both Mom and Dad while they were going about the duties of the Savior. All of these responsibilities were taken in stride, but our gracious parents taught us to acknowledge the hand of the Lord in daily living.

One example occurred when Mom was stake Relief Society president and was driving home from LaGrande with her close friends in the stake Relief Society presidency. As they were driving, a car came around the corner at full speed driving on their side of the road. Mom had no choice but to drive off the right side of the road. It was a rather deep embankment, and as they sat in the car in a stunned state, they took awhile to take stock of their situation. The bank was too steep to drive out, so they climbed out of the car and started walking, looking for a way out. Soon they came upon some old wagon tracks that stretched ahead of them. They returned to the car, and Mom drove along the tracks until they eventually led back onto the highway. They finished their trip, discussing what could have happened.

Upon arriving home, Mom told Dad about the incident, but he was not very concerned; he just checked the car to see if anything had been damaged. The next trip to LaGrande, Mom and Dad went together, and when they came to the spot where Mom had driven off, they stopped and looked it over. Dad was amazed. He said to Mom, "You couldn't have driven down there without rolling over. Someone picked you up and set you down." Mom has had her share of situations where she has been "picked up and set down" and kept safe. The foundation in the Church our parents sought for us by moving to Pendleton worked for them as well. Not only were they active in community affairs but they also became pillars of the Church in Pendleton.

### **Lessons from Retirement Years**

Throughout her years of Church service in the Union Stake in Oregon, Mom had always wanted to serve a mission for the Church. Dad



had served as a young man in the Southern States Mission, and they truly desired to serve a mission together. Soon after Dad's retirement in October 1966, they left for the Southern States Mission—Dad's second time there. They served for two years and found much enjoyment and fulfillment in serving in this capacity. During their last two months in the South, Oregon State University once again contacted Dad and asked if he would be available to go to Amman, Jordan, for eighteen months of service as an agronomist consultant with the United States Agency for International Development. Mom and Dad talked about it and agreed that they should go. They left just three months following their return from their mission.

This move was quite a change in their lives. They were now living in a Muslim country where the Sabbath was on Saturday. This situation, however, did not stop them from going back to their roots in Moro, Oregon: each Sunday they held their own religious services. Mom has expressed many times the joy these times gave them—just the two of them sharing the gospel and the sacrament. Mom said her favorite days were fast Sundays, when she and Dad took turns expressing their testimonies to each other. "Life was sweet," she has said many times about these occasions, and she has counseled us often to adopt that same attitude throughout our lives.

Upon returning from Jordan, our parents settled in Tempe, Arizona, where they were close to their son Stephen and his family and where they worked for several years in the Mesa Temple. These became trying years for Mom and Dad. Dad was diagnosed with cancer and spent his last few years valiantly fighting a losing battle. Mom was very dedicated in her attention to every detail for him during this time. In July 1980, Dad passed away, leaving Mom alone for the first time since September 7, 1927. For nearly fifty-three years, they had worked together. They had raised their family together, served in the Church together, and retired together.

After living in Tempe for ten years, Mom made the decision to move to Provo, Utah, and to build a home so she could be close to her son Dick and her daughter Mary. At the age of eighty, she bought a lot and built herself a home. She still continues to live there by herself and still exudes the warmth, concern, and charity that are so much a part of her example of growing old graciously. In the process, she has indeed grown old graciously by teaching us to accept our roles in life, whatever they are; to bear testimony to our spouses and children routinely and frequently; to be independent but also dependent; and to remind ourselves routinely and frequently that "life is sweet."

## An Interview on Growing Old Graciously

Thus far, we have expressed our feelings and remembrances about our centenarian mother and her teachings about and example of growing old graciously. We decided we should also include her personal thoughts and feelings about the process, so shortly before her hundredth birthday, we asked her the following questions and then transcribed her responses.

*Are you happy you have lived to be a centenarian?*

I don't know whether I'm happy or not. I have always just taken life as it comes. I do want to say, though, that I have never given up having goals. I have always looked forward, and I have always had things I wanted to accomplish or things I wanted to tell somebody or things that are wrong that I've wanted to make right.

One example is that in January of 2003, I looked forward to the new year and said to myself, "This year I'm going to read the scriptures every day." I of course have missed a few days. I started out reading the New Testament, and I enjoyed it immensely. And when I got through, I looked at the Old Testament and realized that I had never really read it word for word. I had heard the Old Testament stories all my life, but I really had never read it. So I decided that reading the Old Testament would be part of my scripture-reading goal for the year. And I am happy to report that I read every word in the Old Testament. Now I'm about to finish the Doctrine and Covenants. Then, at the first of 2004, during my 101st year, my new goal will be to read the Book of Mormon again.

So I have something to look forward to and something to refresh my memory and strengthen my testimony and make me realize how blessed we are to belong to the Church and what hope it brings us. I don't know how people live without such hope in their lives.

*What are you looking forward to? Where does life go from here?*

I am so fortunate because of my family. I look forward to seeing my great-grandchildren go on missions, get married in the temple, and live good, productive lives. I look forward to all my posterity being kind to others and being honest because those are two of the most essential qualities that anyone can have.

Looking to the future, although this may sound a little selfish, I hope I can stay in my own home. But if it comes to the point I can't,

I hope I will accept the consequences graciously and make the best of it. I of course would be most happy to live alone in my own home and be as independent as I can.

*What does “growing old graciously” mean to you?*

I’ve never consciously thought of myself as a gracious person—and that may be part of growing old graciously. I just take each day as it comes. I do know that I don’t want to hurt people—by words, deeds, or looks. I think that growing old graciously means that we avoid speaking ill of others—that we don’t gossip—and that we try to be kind and thoughtful to others.

*What advice do you give your posterity to help them grow old graciously?*

I want my posterity to be honest and trustworthy in everything they do. I want them to love their neighbors as themselves—they can’t go wrong in doing that. I want them to be grateful for their blessings.

Living the principles of the gospel is the best way to get blessings and thereby to grow old graciously. I think the gospel brings peace of mind. The hope and knowledge that the gospel brings us is so wonderful, and it’s sad that everybody doesn’t have it. My hope is that when I’m gone, I will have so lived that I can receive the blessings Heavenly Father has in store for me and that my posterity will have done the same. It will be just perfect to have all my family with me. That is my foremost hope.

One thing I do for my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren is pray for them every night. I pray for all good things for all of them. And I hope they do the same throughout their lives.

*Did some of your growing old graciously come from the example you had as a little girl in seeing your grandmother grow old in your home?*

My grandmother lived with us for thirteen years, and never did any one of us hear a cross word spoken to her. On the morning Merrill and I left for Price to get on the train to go to Salt Lake to get married, we went in to say good-bye to Grandmother. She had on a little cap she wore to bed, and she said to me, “Mal, before you leave this home, I want to tell you something. Never in all the years that I have lived here has your father ever made me feel anything but welcome in his home.” And I’ve always appreciated so much Grandmother telling me that because, as far as I knew, it was the truth. She had the best room in the

house—in fact, the only nice bedroom in the house—and she never was a troublemaker. She spent a lot of time in that room. She subscribed to a daily Danish newspaper and read it, and in the summers she sat in the little green chair that I have in my bathroom and watched us play. Grandmother was a gracious, sweet old lady, and she never interfered in anything. She was certainly a good example to all of us.

*Has Church service helped you grow old graciously?*

Yes. It was just wonderful when we moved to Pendleton and were finally able to serve in the Church. I'll never forget the first Sunday in December 1948 when we walked into that little church down by the river. The chapel had blue drapes and blue carpeting, and there was a grand piano on the stand—in stark contrast to the miserable place down in The Dalles. I felt like we had come to heaven. I really did. And that very day they told us they were building a new church in Pendleton. I was perfectly happy. I thought what we had was wonderful.

Church service made me accept responsibility that I have tried to do my best with. It has helped my testimony. It has made me meet a lot of people I would not have met otherwise. It made me understand the importance of the auxiliaries.

*What role has adversity played in your growing old graciously?*

Losing my husband, Merrill, was the hardest thing I've gone through. But with the hope the gospel brings and an assurance of being with him again, the sting has certainly been taken out of his passing. I don't know what people do when they lose loved ones and they don't have the hope the gospel offers.

The gospel is a way of life; it is part of the plan to help us avoid bitterness. More than ever, I believe that this life is good but that the next life is better. My own adversities have made me understand other people's adversities. Many of my very best friends are now widows, and like me, they're all grateful they belong to the Church and have the hope it brings.

Life is full of adversities. But I have learned to cope by living a clean life, trying to understand other people's problems, being kind and thoughtful, and always thinking of others. Living graciously is a many-splendored thing that has touched every aspect of my life. I've dealt with adversity by living one day at a time. I never dreamed I would live to be a hundred, but I'm glad I did. Life is still sweet for me.

## Conclusion

Maintaining her independence, our mother has lived alone in her wonderful home for nineteen years. She drove a car until the age of ninety-four and would be still be driving if her children had not stepped in and said, “Enough!” Driving her own car was a singular event that defined her independence. Giving up her car was her first step into dependency. It was extremely difficult for her to realize that she must call for a ride or for help. It was not an easy acceptance, but she was willing to do whatever we asked. The roles of parent and children were beginning to reverse.

Even though she had given up her car, she did not give up her Church callings. She served as a visiting teacher until the age of ninety-eight and held a Church calling until the age of ninety-nine. She gave up these responsibilities because of decisions made by her ward leaders, and she received their decisions graciously. She has continued to attend at least sacrament meetings every Sunday, she is on schedule in reading the standard works of the Church, and she continues to lead and direct her family. She continues to be very supportive of and involved in the lives of her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

As our mother approached and passed the ninety-year point in her life, she began to find her roles reversed from previous years. She found herself deferring to her children for assistance with important activities and decisions. But she noticeably did so graciously because the wishes and needs of others were always uppermost in her mind.

As she pointed out in her comments above, in her ninety-eighth year she set out to read the standard works—the entire Old Testament for the first time and the other scriptures one more time among many. Her inquisitiveness and alertness at what she has read from day to day were inspiring and delightful to observe. In the latter half of her ninety-ninth year, we were constantly amazed at her insightful comments and questions about events she encountered in the Old Testament. We were as thrilled as she was when she announced, “Today I’ve finished reading the Old Testament. I read every word in it.” That comment made us appreciative once more of the age in which we live as we remembered Dr. Merrill Oaks and the cataract surgery he performed on both of Mom’s eyes during her eighty-seventh year. The surgery has enabled her to continue enjoying the blessing of excellent eyesight, probably for the rest of her life.

At Thanksgiving time in 2003, just one month before her hundredth birthday, we asked her to tell us her primary thoughts about

growing old graciously. She quickly detailed them for us:

- Keep interested in family, community, and world affairs.
- Read the scriptures every day.
- Express thanks constantly for all aspects of life.
- Be grateful for kindnesses from others, and openly express appreciation where appropriate.
- Remember and enjoy friends and associates.
- Enjoy flowers and all things associated with nature.
- Constantly think about loved ones, especially those who have passed on.

One of our mother's favorite quotations is one from Francis of Assisi. The quotation epitomizes her behavior throughout her hundred years of living it and of growing old graciously: "Preach the gospel every day; if necessary, use words."

On numerous occasions as we have talked to her about being a hundred years old, she has commented that life is sweet. We know that she is prepared to accept whatever the Lord has in store for her.