

TRAIN UP A CHILD . . .

TEACHING CHILDREN VALUES THROUGH “DOMESTIC CHURCH”

By Scott Cooper

I GREW UP as a Mormon in the small Northern California wine-industry town of St. Helena, in the heart of the Napa Valley. Originally we attended church eighteen miles away in the larger town of Napa, but eventually we had our own little branch that met in the St. Helena American Legion Hall. Perhaps because there were so few of us, and since I didn't have any Mormon friends at first, it was easy for me to feel completely connected to others of my age in the community. It was a wonderful statement about our town, and about my parents, that I grew up without any religious or racial sensibility—people were just people. It wasn't until I was ten or eleven that it dawned on me that there were even different religions. I had always assumed my friends went to different buildings for church but that we believed the same things and we were still part of the same basic church. It came as a big surprise when I discovered that other kids knew nothing about Joseph Smith or the Book of Mormon. Of course, for many more years than I care to admit, I also thought that the “golden plates” were in the American Legion Hall's closet.

Our little Mormon branch suited me just fine. Branches are quite different from wards. They are so small they have the feel of family—with all the usual assortment of “uncles,” “aunts,” and other kin just happy to see you (and anyone else who might walk through the door). Not that I was a fan of church—I flatly didn't like sitting on my bottom through so many meetings. But being the only student in most of my classes, and being taught by kindly old widows who thought of me as one of the priorities in their lives, had its advantages. It was not uncommon for my teachers to let me lean over the classroom table and busily color away, even as they delivered their lessons.

I also lived in theological isolation. For me, the Church was above all, about family, not smoking, and being a “sunbeam” for Jesus. I was especially taken by Jesus, the kind son of God. He always seemed so loving and forgiving, and I always felt he would love people no matter what. My teachers had emblazoned in my heart the image of Jesus carrying a lamb over his shoulders.

I knew there was a prophet, and I revered Salt Lake City as Catholics must revere Rome. My impressions of David O. McKay were that he was a man of kindness, who had the striking appearance of a leader, and he spoke for God.

As a young teenager, when I more fully understood the implications of Joseph Smith's “first vision,” I would periodically visit the woods around St. Helena with the hope of getting some of the same answers. My very first attempt was the most memorable. After finishing my prayer, I looked up fully expecting to see the Father and the Son, or maybe at least Moroni; then I began to seriously worry about the devil being around (as happened to Joseph Smith); then I felt a little despondent because nothing at all was happening; then I started feeling guilty about not being worthy to get a vision; and then I focused on getting a “burning in my bosom” which didn't go well either. My own “first vision” wasn't successful in the traditional sense, but it remains a fond memory.

I had a wonderful father who nurtured my more general religious foundation. He was a very religious man. For most of my growing-up years, he was my branch president, priesthood quorum teacher, and seminary teacher. He was devoted to Mormonism, but he never imposed his beliefs on his children. While my father would never have allowed us to do harmful things, he also gave us great latitude to be ourselves, have our own thoughts, and

live our own lives. His greatest influence was through his own exceptional example and his wise, loving approach to parenting. Above all, he was a man of great integrity. He lived what he preached, and what he preached was pursuing a life of faith and virtue. We had no Family Home Evening, rarely had family prayer, and yet I knew that religion and morality were at the core of our lives. I've always believed that for God to be “God,” he would have to be at least as good as my own two parents.

GRADUALLY, I was drawn out of my simple, isolated world of faith. I was absolutely shocked when I first heard, about age fifteen, that black people couldn't hold the Mormon priesthood. I talked to my dad about it. He seemed embarrassed by it himself but explained it the best he could. I was also troubled when I started to more fully understand the Church's doctrines and history with respect to polygamy. I couldn't reconcile this seemingly odd doctrine with my love and devotion for the strong, monogamous family life I had been privileged to be part of. When we made one of our first religious pilgrimages to Salt Lake City for General Conference, I was disappointed while staying at the Church-owned Hotel Utah to learn they sold coffee and liquor. Here I was faithfully living the Word of Wisdom right in the heart of wine country, where Seventh-day Adventist stores refused to sell meat, let alone wine or coffee, and yet right in the middle of our revered Mormon capital, our church was indirectly selling the stuff. I had been raised by a father of strong integrity, and the Hotel Utah practice didn't seem like integrity to me. Little by little, other incongruities and disappointments began to emerge.

To make a long story a little shorter, my early perceptions of the Church altered over time. I continued to reverence the Church, but things were becoming less black and white, more and more gray. Nonetheless, I happily attended BYU and served a Spanish-speaking mission in Chicago. For me, first and foremost, the Church was about families and about living virtuous lives. On my mission, I would tell people that I knew the Church was true, but sometimes not very comfortably, and sometimes I would have to justify it to myself on the basis that I knew the Church was true—aside from the things I had misgivings about. I had placed my discomforts in suspended animation.

After I married and returned to BYU, I felt a need to deal with my misgivings. With time, my personal theology returned to those



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simple beliefs of my early days in the branch—a simple faith in God, trying to do what's right, and the core teachings of Jesus. I'm grateful to my little Mormon branch for reinforcing these anchors in my life.

For seven years after getting married, my wife Julie and I weren't able to have children. This was a difficult experience—wanting to have children and not knowing if we ever would—but also a positive one. It let us be independent and enjoy our time together. It also allowed us to maintain a fairly simple relationship with organized religion. Over time, we had changed from viewing this relationship as an “adult-to-child” relationship with an institution, to seeing it as an “adult-to-adult” relationship with other people of faith. We began to view the wards we lived in as communities of people of faith. Our association with the Church shifted from more formal to less formal, from more involvement to less. Since we didn't have children, we didn't have to worry about church as a vehicle for religious and moral training. And we didn't have to worry about or have to deal with differences between our personal religious beliefs and the official doctrines, history, and practices of the Church.

BUT in a most wonderful way, this all changed. For much of those seven years before conceiving our first child, we were probed, poked, and tested in ways I didn't think humanly possible. And despite the fact that our doctors had concluded that, after all their mischief, we still had only a 6 percent chance of ever having children (how they came up with such an exacting statistic, I've never known), we eventually ended up with not only one winning Lotto number, but three. Our two older sons and younger daughter have been the greatest blessings we could have hoped for.

We were so elated just to have our first child that we hadn't given much thought to some of the implications. We gradually began to wrestle with the issues of what to teach our children to help them be happy, beneficial, and self-reliant. And within that context, we had to answer the questions: *What* should we teach our children about religion and morality? And *how* should we teach them? Given our backgrounds, with our personal beliefs at odds in some cases

with the beliefs of our families' traditional religion, we wondered how we should go about preserving the beliefs that we considered unique and important to us?

When our first son was very little, there was no problem—we didn't go to church very often. But as he got older, despite our shift in our relationship with Mormonism, we began to rely more on Church-based instruction. This was also not a problem, until he became older. But when our incredulous son started asking me questions such as: “Dad, they said God sent a plague and killed a bunch of people. Do you believe that?” or “Dad, they said God drowned almost all of the people on the earth. Do you believe that?” I realized we had to think more about these things and get involved. I knew that despite the kindest efforts of teachers at church, later lessons about God and theology would be even more problematic. I respected the Church and the many good things it had to offer children, but I didn't want my personal religious beliefs, which I valued very highly, to be undermined. I was starting to understand, in a small way, what interfaith parents go through—figuring out how to deal with religious education when your beliefs are somewhat different from each other. Only in our case, the interfaith dilemma wasn't between Julie and me, it was between us and the traditional faith of our clan.

As much as we just wanted the issue to go away, we ultimately decided we needed to get

more directly involved in our children's religious and moral training. We began by occasionally having informal discussions with our children around the kitchen table and reading stories together. We started having more prayers together as a family. The prayers eventually led to brief weekly family devotionals, which, along with other simple family-based traditions, have become the centerpiece of our family's religious life. We have maintained a connection with the Church, but with a lighter touch. The Amish have the custom of gathering together with other families on one Sunday (the “churching” Sunday) and staying home with just one's own family the next. We have loosely adopted this custom by participating in the “gathering church” (ward meetings) every other week or so. The Church, from our perspective, is a support to our personal and family religious experience. Most important for our family, we have learned to take on conscious, personal responsibility for our children's religious and moral education.

AS our family religious life evolved in this direction, I became more interested in understanding family-based religion on an academic level. For a year at the library of the Graduate Theological Union, next to the University of California, Berkeley, campus, I conducted research regarding family religion. What I discovered was quite amazing. I learned that the first priests and teachers of religion were often fa-

WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO BE A
GOOD L.D.S. KID LIKE THE OSMONDS?



CALVIN GRONDHAL

Being clear and honest with our children has not only helped to re-affirm our own uniquely important beliefs, it has helped our children to be comfortably honest about their own thoughts and feelings regarding faith and morality.



L to R: Jackson (14), Brooke (11), Scott, and Adam (17) Cooper, San Francisco, 2002

thers and mothers. For example, the original religious leaders of the Hebrew tribes weren't full-time priests and prophets: they were the heads of clans. The everyday religion of ancient Rome and China was completely family-based, and the officiators of those religious traditions were fathers and mothers. I learned that family religion has been the most fundamental and traditional form of religion throughout much of human history. Over time, clans and families adopted organized, institutional, religions as their family religions of choice. But for some time, organized religion remained secondary to the family and its own authority and culture.

Even today, much of the religious activity in India, Asia, and Africa is home- or family-based. In modern Judaism, most communal traditions are mirrored by domestic counterparts. The Sabbath is celebrated with the lighting of candles, a special meal, and children's blessings in the home, in addition to communal services in the synagogue. Passover, Hanukkah, and most other festivals are celebrated in both the home and in community, with certain family meals taking on the character of religious ritual.

In today's Mormonism, in addition to an emphasis on family prayer, scripture study,

and family home evening, the LDS priesthood itself is frequently held by the father of the home—allowing fathers a unique opportunity to baptize and bless their own children. Having priesthood in the Mormon home naturally reinforces the importance of religion in the life of the family.

I have come to believe that regardless of whether or not we have a strong affiliation with organized religion, the home and family—however we define those terms—need to be at the center of our religious and moral lives. In modern theological parlance, our "domestic church" needs to be at least as fundamental to our spiritual lives as is the "gathering church," if not more so.

Over the past ten years or so, our family has been more actively involved in our "domestic church." I even became interested to the point of writing a book on the topic, *God at The Kitchen Table*.¹ Our efforts to provide religious and moral training to our children have been mostly informal, and we've tried to keep the formal aspects pretty lean and simple. Our more formal home-based efforts have been centered on a family devotional on Sundays when we're home. In general, we try to make Sundays a day for family (including "extended family"—by blood or friendship),

non-commercial enjoyment, rest, and spiritual refreshment. We have also participated in religious holidays and festivities as a family. And though we're not particularly consistent, we try to have nighttime family prayer when our children go to bed. Other parents I've known have provided spiritual influence for their children by watching videos together, reading scriptures and other good books together, going on religious "field trips," and participating in community service and charitable drives as a family.

But frankly, the most effective things we seem to do are much less formal: having conversations with our children about God, life, and happiness; maintaining mundane family rules that reinforce basic concepts of right and wrong; having them complete chores and other tasks that help them develop internal (spiritual) discipline; having them help neighbors or friends who need assistance; and trying to maintain a home environment in which they can feel a sense of emotional support and refuge. And ultimately, as we all learn as we travel through this mysterious experience called parenthood, simply loving our children and providing them with good examples and occasional firmness are much more critical to their positive development than any formal religious or moral training we might give them.

DESPITE my own independent religious beliefs, I have appreciated the influence of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in my children's lives. I admit that what I hear in sacrament meetings isn't always music to my ears. But a church can be a very positive association of people. A church can strengthen and enrich our religious and spiritual lives. It can be a very good resource to help us in worshipping God and teaching our children. It can provide the structure and discipline to help us maintain our commitment to God and to our personal moral beliefs and vows. Communal prayers, songs, and readings focused on God can inspire us, comfort us, and turn our hearts back to God and God's children. We can develop strong friendships that bring us joy and carry us through the ups and downs

of life. Churches can provide the organizational muscle to create opportunities for wholesome activities and community service for our children. Churches can reinforce good values for our children. They can also be a place where our children can meet friends and future soul mates.

We don't have to agree with all details of an organized religion for it to have value in our lives. Religions are human organizations trying to carry out divine missions. We certainly don't agree with everything that happens in our government, schools, or workplaces, yet we continue to associate with them because of the net positive value. If the official views of the Church differ from my own, I am respectful but direct in pointing out such differences to my children. I say in essence, "This is an area where my own beliefs are different from those of the Church, and this is why." I also usually add something to the effect that: "You'll develop your own thoughts and beliefs about this issue over time. And your beliefs don't need to be the same as mine, any more than my beliefs are exactly as my parents believed. But I want you to know how I feel about this and why." Being clear and honest with our children has not only helped to re-affirm our own uniquely important beliefs, it has helped our children to be comfortably honest about their own thoughts and feelings regarding faith and morality.

According to a September 2002 report released by *Child Trends*, academic studies indicate that parents' positive religious influence can result in children having "lower levels of child behavior problems and . . . higher levels of adolescent social responsibility."² Researchers have found evidence that teens involved in religious activity are less likely to be involved in drug and alcohol use, early sexual activity, or delinquent behavior. And according to research released in 2002 by the University of Pennsylvania, 84 percent of U.S. teens find religion to be important in their lives. Religion is important to our kids. Whether we're orthodox, unorthodox, or unattached, for the benefit of our children, we need to develop a way to pass along our religious and moral beliefs to our children. The Church can be a helpful resource in this process, but it can't replace the role of the parent as the primary moral guide and mentor.



NOTES

1. Scott Cooper, *God at the Kitchen Table: Teaching Your Religious and Moral Beliefs to Your Children* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002).

2. See <www.childtrends.org>.

CONGRATULATIONS

TO THE 2003 EUGENE ENGLAND MEMORIAL
PERSONAL ESSAY CONTEST WINNERS

1ST PRIZE, \$250

EVENTUALLY APPROACHING CHATA

BY KENT R. BEAN, BOWLING GREEN, OHIO

VALOR REQUIRED [CHATA] TO SUSTAIN HER GRIEFS IN SILENCE. HER SMALL BODY WAS NOT UP TO THE TASK OF CONTAINING SUCH HUGE SECRETS, AND SHE COLLAPSED. I LIVED IN THE RUINS OF THEIR HOME, PAYING FOR A BEDROOM AND FOOD. CHATA'S MOTHER OR ESTELA USUALLY SERVED THE FOOD. CHATA'S NIECE, CIELA, RAN THROUGH THE HOUSE AND THE YARD WITH THE ENTHUSIASM OF CHILDHOOD, A LIGHT OF HOPE AMONG SO MANY DARKENED ADULTS.



2ND PRIZE, \$150

MURKY PONDS AND LIGHTED PLACES

BY CAROL CLARK OTTESON, MAPLETON, UTAH

WE [SHARED] A BLANKET BETWEEN US, FOCUSED ON THE BRIGHT LIGHT OF THE SMALL HEATER. COLD BUT WARM, DARK BUT LIGHT. WE TALKED . . . AT LENGTH ABOUT GOD, ABOUT LIGHT, ABOUT HOPE, ABOUT HER HEADSTRONG DETERMINATION TO HELP HER PEOPLE . . . "CHINA NEEDS SOMETHING TO BELIEVE IN," SHE SAID. I THOUGHT OF C.S. LEWIS'S DESCRIPTION OF THESE KINDS OF EXPERIENCES AS "PATCHES OF GODLIGHT" THAT IN THE DARK GIVE US A "TINY THEOPHANY."



3RD PRIZE, \$100

NEBULA: AN ARTIST'S JOURNEY

BY MARI E. JORGENSEN, MIDWAY, UTAH

THIS STATEMENT, THAT MANY OF US AS ARTISTS HAVE SQUANDERED OUR CREATIVE ENERGIES ON OTHERS, MAKES ME SQUIRM INSIDE MY SKIN. MUCH IN THE SAME WAY I SQUIRM WHEN I READ ESSAYS, BOOKS, CHURCH TALKS, SCRIPTURES, WHATEVER, THAT LAUD THE SELF-EFFACING MOTHER. THEY MAKE ME FEEL JANGLY AND UNHINGED. THE DICTIONARY DEFINES "EFFACE" AS TO "RUB-OUT" OR "OBLITERATE." A SOUL-CHILLING IMAGE. BUT AREN'T WE AS MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH ADMONISHED TO LOSE OURSELVES IN SERVICE TO OTHERS? AND HOW CAN A MOTHER NOT BE, TO A CERTAIN EXTENT, SELF-EFFACING?