

We all have the power to create conditions in our life that will cause things to come into existence, regardless of circumstances—things that will inspire us, call us into action, cause us to make the world better.

CREATING FAITH

THE CONDITIONS OF EXISTENCE

By Jody England Hansen

I HAVE COME TO REALIZE, IN RECENT YEARS, THAT the experience of living is a creative process. If there is anything I really want to experience in my life, I have the power to create it. Once I choose something I want to experience, one of the first steps of creation is seeing what the conditions of existence are for that experience.

For example: If I wanted the experience of teaching art classes in my home, then I would create these conditions—classroom space and materials, curriculum and students. Once these conditions exist, I can teach. It's as basic as starting a fire. If you have fuel, oxygen, and a spark, the conditions of existence for fire, then fire happens.

I want to create faith in my life—faith as an experience.

The creative process is not always easy, but I think it is something that is inherent to us as human beings. When I acknowledge the creative power of God, that I came from that power and am connected, even drawn toward it, that is when I feel most alive. When I say, "There is nothing I can do about it," then I am denying the divine genetic make-up that I believe we all have.

When I say "I can" and "I am," I embrace my heritage. I was raised by activists. When Dad saw a proposition on the ballot in Palo Alto in the '60s that would take out an entire neighborhood of Arts and Crafts homes to build a commercial medical complex and change the entire nature of the city, he didn't dwell on his lack of resources or experience. He and Mom went to work doing everything they knew how to do, learning how to do what they didn't know, and asking others to do what they couldn't. I remember, as a nine-year-old, being driven with my siblings and our friends to different neighbor-

hoods, then going door to door to pass out flyers that asked people to vote against the proposition. Then, after the proposition was defeated, Mom and Dad drove us around the neighborhood that had been saved. People had hung banners out of their homes expressing gratitude for the votes that saved their homes from being condemned and leveled. It was the first time I was aware of the joy that comes from making a difference in the world. Last spring, Mike and I took our kids to visit Palo Alto. We drove them around that same neighborhood. The houses are still there, as beautiful as ever.

In the early '80s, I watched my parents create Food for Poland. They had every reason not to. They didn't have the money or the time. They didn't know the right people or have the contacts needed to collect large donations of food and get them into the right hands in a Communist country that was under military control. They were even threatened by people who thought they were aiding and abetting the enemy. They had every reason not to and only one reason to do it: they saw it as a way they could make a difference in the world for peaceful resolution to conflict. They created the contacts they needed, worked tirelessly (although I remember being tired a lot) and kept asking for help. Shipments were gathered, celebrities joined the cause, statewide fast days were declared, the LDS Church cooperated with the Catholic church to get the shipments to the Solidarity Union. The Polish government was overthrown through peaceful resistance. Years later, the wall came down, without tanks or bombs.

My parents had no guarantee that the food shipments would get through. We may never know the extent of the difference Food for Poland made. But once my parents saw that the resistance movement in Poland needed food, doing nothing would have gone against their very natures.

HOW DOES ALL this fit in with creating faith in my life? What is faith to me, and why do I want to experience it?

One definition of faith is a hope for things not seen, which are true. One way I define faith is knowing that anything is possible in life. And that what I do makes a difference.



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What conditions do I need to create so I can experience faith?

THE FIRST CONDITION of faith is choice. Our agency, the power we have to choose is inherent to our existence.

About a year and a half after my dad died, I was taking a service leadership course. In one of the classes, I shared about the difference Dad had made in the world. The leader of the course shared a concept that has had a great impact on me. She said, "There are three things that are certain in life. One—there is a day that we are born; two—there is a day that we will die; and three—we have absolute choice in who we will be with the time in between." We talked about the

one day I was able to see that the only thing that had happened was—my father died. There was not some grand conspiracy connected with his death that was designed to take away my family's life. The pain of missing him was still there and always will be. But I can still choose to live an extraordinary life, even though he is gone. In the moment I choose that, everything that was amazing about my dad comes back to me. I see that everything I love about him will never be gone. His words and conversations come to me as though he were speaking them to me. I see him in other people who are working to create peace and dialogue. I sense his presence whenever I am with my mom. When I choose to be miserable because my dad died, then I have no faith—no possibility of being with him now or ever. When I choose to have

When I say "I can" and "I am," I embrace my heritage.

an extraordinary life, partly due to my dad, I have him back in my life now and always, even in the midst of missing him.
I have faith when I choose.

LOVE is a condition for faith. There are countless definitions for love, especially in song lyrics and poetry. Love is like a red, red rose; love is all you need; love hurts, I'll never fall in love again; I love you, you love me. If they don't define love, they define conditions for love. In the wee small hours of the morning; why do birds suddenly appear; when I find myself in times of trouble; it's a

beautiful day in the neighborhood, won't you be mine? Which form of love is a condition for faith?

I have learned from my early years that ultimate love is unconditional love. The love God offers us. It took most of my life to see that loving unconditionally is not the same as enabling or allowing abuse. God doesn't. Yet God loves us all, even when we are abusive. In those moments when I have let myself be in the presence of God's love, when I stop listening to all the noise around me and in my head, then I sense that I am completely accepted and appreciated for exactly who I am and who I am not, in that moment. From there, I can do anything with my life. I see that God loves all of us that way. I think that is what we all want: to receive and to give that kind of love. Why does it seem to be such a rare occurrence? If love is the thing that I want most in my life, why am I stingy and withhold it from others?

Then I saw there was another facet to creating unconditional love. It was during a recent lesson about the parable of the Good Samaritan. I saw that the message of that parable is: if there is any one you don't love, you don't love anyone. *Anyone?* Never mind accepting and appreciating political



The Englands in Palo Alto, circa 1967

visual image of how that was presented on my father's headstone. A birth date, a dash, and a death date. A small dash represents such a life. Since then, a phrase comes up frequently in my head: "Who are you choosing to be in the dash?"

I am not saying that we choose to have terrible things happen to us. That is just what life is like. Wonderful things happen, and terrible things happen. I believe I knew that before I chose to have a life on earth. I don't think I made that choice in ignorance. I chose to come here and live this life. I shouted for joy at the prospect, even knowing that pain is a part of life. It is no wonder that I feel helpless and hopeless when I am complaining, "This shouldn't be happening, it's not fair, this life is not the one I wanted." When I do that, I am denying a powerful choice I made.

I spent five months doing that after Dad died, telling myself, "I shouldn't have to live life without my father. If he is gone, then all the amazing things that my children, my husband, and I were going to learn and experience with him are gone." Then

leaders whom I vehemently disagree with, what about past Church leaders and ward members who offended me? Will that keep me from having unconditional love with my husband and children? With God?

I thought about 9/11. Thousands of people dying in a very short time. Some who died were the terrorists flying the planes into those buildings. We're told they expected to go straight to God, to sit next to him. I believe we will all go to God after this life. We are all God's children. But some of us will not want to stay there, because it is not what we expected and not the direction we chose here. It works for me to think that everyone who left this life that day was greeted by God or God's messengers who would help them see where they would belong. I think that we continue to learn, that our Heavenly Parents would make every attempt to invite us and teach us to choose to be with them.

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What about the terrorists? They are children of God. Who might be the ones to greet them? I think that my dad, who died only weeks before 9/11, would have been one who could greet the terrorists and teach them the love of God. Who better to teach those who had learned to be so driven by hate than someone who had learned to love everyone, even those who would be his enemies? That is where I want to belong—with those who can love in the face of hate and who have the freedom that comes with that. From there, anything is possible. The whole world can shift.

I have faith when I love.

LISTENING is a condition of faith. The act of prayer is what most effectively puts me in a listening mode. I have not found any place or time in life where I would not be able to pray if I wanted or needed to. The very act of expressing gratitude, concern, and asking for help opens my mind to ideas, suggestions, and direct revelation. What amazes me is how quickly I can go from being confused and frustrated to having at least some comfort and direction when I open myself up to listening for anything. When I only want to hear what I want to hear, the chances of staying confused are high, because I am not listening. If I am listening so that I have room to hear and consider anything, there is no end to what I can receive.

I get to practice this with my kids. When I only want to hear things like—"Thanks Mom, you are the best." "Wow, you're brilliant, Mom." "I agree with you." "You are right, Mom"—then I am not willing to listen to anything else and will even argue with anything else. When that happens, my children learn not to say anything, or they lie. When I am

willing to listen to anything from them, without adding judgment, then they will talk forever.

An interesting example of listening is the 1978 revelation about the priesthood. How much sooner would that revelation have occurred if a larger portion of the members of the Church had been listening and praying for it? How many more were listening for it at that time because an apostle had asked them to pray for it in the 1960s?

When I first heard that Dad was in surgery and they had found a brain tumor, I was praying constantly—most of it pleading. We were hearing some conflicting opinions from the doctors. What I heard from God as I prayed is that we would have a little bit of time with Dad and to cherish it. As we all worked to help him recover from the surgery, I wasn't willing to hear anything else. He was getting stronger, and I planned on him being around for years. Then when he grew weaker again, I kept asking God for what I wanted—no more cancer



Gene and Jody, circa 1994

and my father strong again. It was only when I was willing to listen for anything that I heard the prompting from God, "Let him go; let him be healed completely with me." With that prompting came a physical change. I realized that I had spent energy being anxious. I was no longer wasting that energy. I needed it to help my parents through the last days of Dad's life. I was also able to just be with my dad in the final weeks without trying to save him. If I hadn't listened for that prompting, the few moments of peace I had during the most devastating time of my life would not have been possible.

I have faith when I listen.

REPENTANCE is a condition of faith. I have tended to link repentance with blame and guilt. The more I have embraced the gospel of Christ and have seen how much God wants us to be happy, I am able to see that repentance is a gift, an opportunity to be responsible for what I want to have happen in my life. I don't have to wait until the stars line up, circumstances are

perfect, and everyone around me is doing what I want before I can have real joy.

A few years ago, there was a fair amount of tension between me and my son, Joseph. It seemed that we couldn't have any interaction without it turning into an argument. There were times when he would get up and walk out of the room when I came in because it was too hard for him to be around me. I kept trying to think of what was wrong with him. Why couldn't he see that I loved him and I wanted what was best for him? I wanted him to do his homework, practice the piano, keep his room clean, do his chores, eat right, and be kind because that would help him become a happy, functioning, capable adult—why couldn't he understand that? But he seemed to think that I didn't care about him at all and fought with me over everything. It got to the point that I was afraid I was losing my son.

I finally was willing to look for ways that I was responsible



Jody and Joseph today

for causing this tension. With the help of an amazing coach, I was able to see that I was not motivated to get Joseph to practice and study and work because I loved him and wanted to train him to be an adult. I was motivated by wanting people to think I was a good mom, who had children who were good at school and at home, who were very smart and very talented. I had taken activities that had been fun and satisfying to Joseph and turned them into requirements for being my child. I was able to see that he never could feel loved and accepted around me because there was always something else to accomplish. I saw that I had lied to him when I told him I loved him, because I was always trying to get him to be different.

This was a very painful thing for me to see. But the moment I saw it, I knew that I did not have to let things continue this way. I saw I was responsible for creating this tension, I could be responsible for creating a new relationship with Joseph. I did not waste time wallowing in blame or guilt. I went to Joseph, told him what I saw I had done, promised him I would

stop doing it, and asked for his forgiveness. I told him that if he ever felt that I was breaking my promise, he could tell me, so I could back off and see if that was so. He worked with me to set up guidelines and rules around getting chores, homework, and practicing done. Now if he gets things done, he knows there are benefits; if he doesn't, he has chosen the consequences. If he does or he doesn't, he and I both know it has nothing to do with me looking like a good mom. It took a while, and we are constantly repenting and forgiving each other, but he hugs me and tells me he loves me, a lot.

We have a good time together, and we can laugh about me actually wanting him, in the past, to do things so I could look good. In other words, I repented, and he forgave me. There are still plenty of moments of conflict, but a few years ago I could not have imagined having such a great relationship with my teenage son. Now, anything is possible with him.

I have faith when I repent.

We are constantly repenting and forgiving each other, but he hugs me and tells me he loves me, a lot.

FORGIVENESS is a condition of faith. My mom shared a definition of forgiveness with me that I like. She said, "Forgiveness is giving up all desire of changing the past." I have many things that I said and did in the past that I can let hang around in front of me, making me wish them back, reminding me of how stupid or ashamed I felt when I made a mistake or really did something wrong. Without much effort at all, I can vividly recall times when someone else hurt or offended me. Keeping those things around from the past, wanting them to be different, thinking they should not have happened, keeps a barrier around me that is stronger than a brick wall. This barrier of hanging on to the past gets in the way of everything.

My degree is in art. I remember when I was in college and constantly working on art projects, one of the most terrifying moments for me was when I had a blank canvas or blank paper in front of me. What if started drawing in the wrong place? What if it didn't look right? Had I done enough rough sketches to move on to the nice paper? It's amazing I got any projects done.

Luckily, the majority of my arts training has occurred since then. I learned long ago that being uptight over putting marks on paper will only produce uptight marks. People are dying of cancer, there are wars going on where children are being massacred. Knowing that is happening, I don't have the time or the energy to waste on being worried about making a wrong mark on nice paper. I do think that every act of creation is an act against war. So I create. And I teach others to create, to feel free to make marks on paper that are uniquely their own. That moment when I have a blank paper in front of me has become

precious to me. In that moment, nothing is in the way, anything can happen, and it is all wonderful.

Forgiveness is what can take the clutter of the past away from being in front of me. I can have a blank page for my future life, where anything can happen. How does it work? Christ suffered the atonement out of love for us, with no guarantee that we would accept it. When I can allow myself to receive that much love, my heart is broken. The pain, ugliness, and shame of past sins—my sins as well as those against me—can be released from my heart. Nothing is left, a blank page where anything is possible. I choose to fill it with love.

I like this translation of Isaiah 65:17–18:

Can we leave old ways behind and begin our lives afresh? For now I create new heavens and a new earth and the past need not be remembered, nor ever brought to mind. Be glad and rejoice in what I can create.

I have faith when I forgive.

SERVICE is a condition for faith. One expression of that for me is involvement in the Church. It is a structured organization that provides continual opportunities to create all the conditions I have mentioned. I have, my entire life, been able to serve, worship, teach, learn, and be served by people who I love being around, and some who irritate me to no end, as well as everyone in between. I have learned to sustain and support leaders who have constantly inspired me, and some who I don't agree with at all, as well as everyone in between. I am grateful I had a father who taught me that I could sustain and support leaders without having to agree with them. I have come to realize that there are as many points of view and opinions as there are people on the earth. When I saw that wanting all of my leaders and fellow members to agree with my opinions made as much sense as them wanting me to agree with theirs, then I was able to stop wasting energy trying to get people to agree with my brilliant way of thinking. For me, church activity is a persistent exercise in learning to love when it is not easy and learning to serve when it is not convenient. The long periods of time where I felt the sacrifice was greater than the blessing have been more than compensated during times of great need when my church community more than supported me. Church activity asks me to constantly look toward the person I say I want to be. Left on my own, I would only be giving lip service to wanting to help others in the community while I was checking out which movies I could rent for the weekend.

I have faith when I serve.

LANGUAGE is a condition of faith. The words of Christ's gospel are beautiful to me. Here is what I see. Creation began with language. God, our Heavenly Parents, have such powerful integrity that what they speak is. They *are* their word. They spoke the conditions of a world where we could live and choose and create, and the elements obeyed. Light, water, earth, plants, animals. And here is the earth. The ultimate playing field for mortals who might want to practice for im-

mortality and eternal life. Christ came to teach us and be an example of love beyond comprehension, just so we could have a hint of God's love for us. God has poured down every imaginable resource for inspiration, direction, and revelation since life began so we would know we are loved and wanted. We can choose to listen and respond, or not, because God honors our choices. This continues on beyond where we are now. God will never stop reaching out to us. If we choose to follow, we will be like them. How can I know this? Because they spoke their promise. They are their word.

I have faith when I speak words of faith.

I REMEMBER A demonstration from a science class I took years ago. There was a chamber that contained fuel for a fire but no oxygen. A flame thrower shot huge flames into the chamber, but the fire could not exist. The conditions were not right for fire. When the chamber was filled with oxygen, it took only a small spark to start a large blaze.

It is easy to see this life as a series of trials and steps that we "have to" take in order to return to God and those we love. The gospel of Christ does not inspire me to take that view. We all have the power to create conditions in our life that will cause things to come into existence, regardless of circumstances—things that will inspire us, call us into action, cause us to make the world better. Or we can create conditions which will bring about frustration, exhaustion, guilt, separation, loneliness. When I choose to cause faith to exist in my life, even in the midst of difficult circumstances, I get to experience the love, connection and inspiration that is promised in Christ's teachings. ☺



ROCHESTER IN MAY

Lilacs in Rochester in May
 andy wharholic, forget the
 marilyn, forget the campbells
 soup can, only lavender
 off Monroe Avenue. I've
 been there poking around
 Highland Park until the
 heavy fragrance overwhelmed
 me like trying to absorb the
 Sistine Chapel all at once,
 closing in on you, no place
 to breathe in the cool open
 space of the museum.

—JAN BALL