

Talk given by Brent C. James at the
Funeral of Barbara Joyce Hendrickson James
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It started more than a month ago. On several occasions, when we had a private moment, mom told me that she missed her mother; that she missed her sisters; that she missed her daughter, our older sister Sherry, who died about 10 years ago. She said that she intended to go see them, to be with them.

I stand before you at her command, repeated on each of those occasions. She commissioned me to provide “a good LDS talk” at this celebration of her life. She told me to keep it short. She said she wanted everyone to feel happy for her. And she told me to tell you, in her name, to “do what you know you are supposed to do.”

In celebrating her life and her example I thought to explore two central principles: The first is the power of choice. The second is the power of remembering.

Almost 30 years ago I met a man who told a remarkable story. As a young man he had fallen deeper and deeper into the drug culture. His addiction led him to crime to get money to support his growing habit. Eventually, it led him to kill a man. He had recently emerged from a life spent mostly in prison.

He described his life as a series of choices. His choices, he claimed, created a world – his daily world. Each decision that he made determined the framework of the next set of choices that he would face. He described his cumulative choices as courses of stones, one laid upon another, that became his prison walls. As the walls rose around him he saw himself as a child of God struggling to do the best he could with the daunting circumstances that life cast in his path. It was only in prison, in the depths of his despair, that he finally realized that he had himself created those circumstances. Stone by stone, he took down those walls; then stone by stone, choice by choice, he laid a foundation for a new and very different life.

Real choice is impossible without free will. Within the LDS Church, the term we use for free will is “moral agency.” It is God’s first principle. It is what separates his kingdom from that of Lucifer. It is His first gift to his children, which He promises that He will never violate. It grants our ability to grow, to develop, to become more like Him. It is the foundation of what the scriptures variously call Eternal Progression, The Plan of Salvation, and the Great Plan of Happiness. Victor Frankl, the German psychiatrist who chose imprisonment in Hitler’s concentration camps in order to support his patients who

were involuntarily sent there, said that our God-given ability to choose is the only source of real meaning in life.

Faith, at its heart, is a choice. Terry Givens recently observed that human life is perfectly structured to force us to choose.

“In this world,” he said, “one is always provided with sufficient materials out of which to fashion a life of credible conviction or dismissive denial. ... What we choose to embrace, to be responsive to, is the purest reflection of who we are and what we love. That is why faith – the choice to believe – is, in the final analysis, an action that is positively laden with moral significance.

“The call to faith ... is not some test created by a coy god waiting to see if we ‘get it right.’ It is a summons to Godliness. It is issued under the only conditions which can allow us to reveal fully who we are, what we most love, and what we most devoutly desire. ... Like the poet’s image of a church bell that reveals its latent music only when struck, or a dragonfly that flames forth its beauty only in flight, so does the content of a human heart lie buried until this action calls it forth. The greatest act of self-revelation occurs when we *choose* what we will believe, in that space of freedom that exists between knowing that a thing is and knowing that a thing is not. This is the realm where faith operates; and when faith is a freely chosen gesture, it expresses something essential about the self.”

I believe that this concept goes even deeper: A man sees in the world what he carries in his heart. What he carries in his heart depends on his choices, laid down over time, layer upon layer.

The philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said it this way:

“I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. I possess tremendous power to make life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. ... If we treat people as they are, we make them worse. If we treat people as they ought to be, we help them become what they are capable of becoming.”

We are all world builders. Day by day, choice by choice, we each build the world within which we will live.

If you choose to follow the path of faith you will create a world of miracles. You will see them everywhere – in the beauty and wonders of the earth, in a sunrise, in the clouds above the mountains. You’ll see them in a loved one’s face, and hear it in their laugh.

You will live them through selfless service to others. Your heart will swell, and at unexpected moments you will experience a quiet joy, a peace that surpasses understanding. Eventually, you will have experiences that convince you that God lives, that He loves us, and that He wants us to be with him. Those experiences can be more real, in those moments, than life itself.

Yogi Bera stated the same fundamental truth this way: “If I had not believed it, I could not have seen it.” Spencer Kimball was more eloquent: “Faith precedes the miracle” ... and faith is, at its core, a choice.

My mother was a woman of faith. Faith leads to hope, and hope leads to charity. It changes how we see, and how we respond to, those around us. Joseph the Prophet taught, “We may judge how close we are to God by the level of compassion we have” for those around us (TPJS, p. 241). The more we are like God, the more tender and loving we are.

Mom chose to build up, not to tear down. She chose service to others, not complaints about her own hurts and annoyances. She chose true charity as perfected, exemplified, and personified in Jesus Christ. She chose life.

For example, most of you probably never knew that she suffered from shingles, a disease caused by a common virus called herpes zoster. In her case, it meant she lived in constant pain. We tried to control it in various ways, and with various medications, but never with significant success. The reason you would not have known is that she very rarely talked about it. You had to ask, even probe. Another example: Recently one of her friends, married for many years, was complaining – discussing the ongoing challenges associated with fitting your own life to that of a spouse. Mom’s response (now think about this one): “Being married to Carl made my halo brighter.”

The thing that most impressed me in our final conversations, but did not surprise me, was her complete conviction. She showed no fear. She had no doubt. If anything, she was impatient. She stood at that dark doorway that we all, one day, must face. With eyes of faith she looked through it to another life. She saw her mother; she saw her sisters; she saw her daughter, all waiting to take her into their embrace. Then she stepped into the light.

That brings us to the principle of remembering. Again drawing on Professor Givens: “Remembering can be the highest form of devotion. To remember is to rescue the sacred from the vacuum of oblivion.” To remember our mother, her life and her example is to “say ‘no!’ to the ravages of time, to refuse to allow her to be just another datum in the catalogue of what has past,” and to instead allow her to continue to contribute to our lives.

More generally, such memories can strengthen our own faith in “the long dry spells that make up so much of life. Very few are entirely bereft of at least one solace-giving memory: a childhood prayer answered, a testimony borne, a fleeting moment of perfect peace. And for those few who despairingly insist that they have never heard so much as a whisper, then know this: We don’t need to look for a burning bush. All we need is to be still and remember that,” through people like our mother, “we have known the goodness of love, the rightness of virtue, the nobility of kindness and faithfulness. As we remember, we might ask if we perceive in such beauties merely the random effects of Darwinism, or the handwriting of God on our hearts.”

In memory of our mother and her time on this earth with us I would like to close with one of my favorite stories from the scriptures, and with a testimony born of faith. I first heard the story, in this form, from President Howard Hunter:

Howard W. Hunter. Ensign Nov 1979, pg 64 – Reading the Scriptures:

There was an incident in the life of the Savior that was mentioned by Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Jesus and those who were with him had just recrossed the Sea of Galilee, and a multitude of people who had been waiting met him on the shore

Mark 5:22

“And, behold [in other words, suddenly and unexpectedly], there cometh one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name.”

Now, the larger synagogues of that day were presided over by a college of elders under the direction of a chief or a ruler. This “ruler of the synagogue” was a man of rank and prestige whom the Jews looked upon with great respect.

Mark 5:22 (continued)

“And when he saw him [that is, when Jairus saw Jesus], he fell at his feet.”

This was a most unusual circumstance for a man of rank and prestige, a ruler of the synagogue, to kneel at Jesus’ feet—at the feet of one considered to be, at best, an itinerant teacher with the gift of healing. Many others of learning and prestige saw Jesus but ignored him. Their minds were closed. They made a different choice.

Mark 5:23

“And [Jairus] besought him greatly, saying, My little daughter lieth at the point of death.”

This is typical of what frequently happens when a person comes to Christ, not so much for his or her own need, but because of the desperate need of a loved one. Then comes a great acknowledgment of faith:

Mark 5:23 (continued)

“I pray thee, come and lay thy hands on her, that she may be healed; and she shall live.”

It is not necessary to read the remainder of the story. When they got to the home of the ruler of the synagogue, Jesus took the little girl by the hand and raised her from the dead.

These words show not only the faith of a father torn with grief, but are also a reminder to us that whatever Jesus lays his hands upon lives. If Jesus lays his hands upon a marriage, it lives. If he is allowed to lay his hands on a family, it lives. In like manner, he will lift and raise every man and every woman to a new and better life who will permit the Savior to take him by the hand.

I believe that when our mother stepped through that door, her hand was in the firm grasp of the risen Christ. She knew that grip. She had felt it many times before. And in His hands, she lives.

To my father and sister and brothers, when it comes our own time to follow her through that door, I predict that the first person standing in the light to embrace us will be our mother, Joyce James. Oh, the joy of that moment, as our faith and hope in Christ turn into knowing, and we know again this blessed woman who gave so much of her life and love to us!

The Prophet Joseph Smith (Doctrine & Covenants 76:22-24)

(22) And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives! (23) For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father— (24) That by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God.