The Virtue of Values

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At least once in a lifetime, each of us will have an event that shapes our life and our attitude and starts us on a course that we can either embrace or reject. I can remember the very first one of those I had. It is a little embarrassing, but I am going to tell you about it anyway. Looking back, this was the first thing I can remember that really made me stop and think, “What is it that I am doing? Why am I doing what I am doing and how can I become better?” I came from a large family. I was the sixth child of nine, had four older brothers and an older sister. For some reason, as a young child, I got in the habit of doing little things that I shouldn’t have and then lying about them. They weren’t big lies and they weren’t bad things, but they were consistent and the more I told a lie, the easier it became to tell another lie and to cover up what I had done. I kept doing that and I was just young when I realized this. I was maybe 10 or 11 and one day, I did something that I knew was very wrong and, I realized later, very dangerous. I really didn’t think anyone would know that it was me who did it because we had a lot of kids. When it happened, I denied it and I lied about it and I was not about to change my story.

This is what I did. My brother who was six years older than I was had just received a .22 rifle. We lived in the city, just west of the capitol building, and in our backyard we had two old sheds that we used to keep coal in. One day he took me out in the backyard with that gun and was shooting target practice and showing me how good he was. I thought, “Wow, that’s really neat.” One day, when no one was at home, I went into his room upstairs, took the gun, got a bullet, put it in it, aimed it out the window, and shot it into one of those old sheds that were out there, just like he had. I thought, “Wow, I can do that!” When he got home, he could tell someone had been messing with his gun. He came straight to me and knew that I had done it, but, as planned, I said, “I didn’t do it.” I was holding firm in the fact that I did not bother his gun and I was not going to confess to anything like that, even
though all the circumstantial evidence pointed to me. I really stood firm and was not about to change my story. I thought I had gotten away with something, but it wasn’t long before I learned a lesson that has stayed with me for the rest of my life. My conscience kicked in and I began to feel bad about lying about what I had done. The deed I didn’t think was so bad, but lying about it got to me and I didn’t know how to overcome those feelings of guilt. It had been dangerous and I had lied about it. In doing that and not fessing up to what I had done, I damaged my relationship with my brother and with my mother, and my mother loved me more than anyone in the whole world. I had shaken her trust in me and I had disappointed her and caused her a lot of hurt. She had put all of her time and all of her attention and all of her satisfaction into raising her children, teaching us correct principles, serving the Lord, and living what she taught. She was a person of character and deep values and very strong convictions.

One day, not long after this gun incident, I could overhear some of my mother’s friends talking and one of them said, “I don’t believe that woman has ever told a lie in her life. She always tells the truth. You can count on her to always be honest with you.” Those words made something inside of me stand up and listen to what was being said, and I realized that I was totally different from her. It may have been because I had just told the biggest lie of my life, that those words affected me the way they did, but I realized that I was completely opposite from what she was. I loved her, I admired her, and yet I wasn’t anything like her in that area. I vowed right then that I would never tell a lie again. I knew that the kind of reputation that she had was much preferred to the way I felt and to where I was headed. That was a turning point for me, the very first one that I can remember that impacted me that way, and along the way there have been a lot of them. I was willing to give my full attention and all my effort to changing my ways and starting to tell the truth, because I wanted people to be able to say that I was an honest person. I am grateful that that happened because I found many, many times in raising children that they wanted to know I would never lie to them, that they could trust me, that they could know that what I was telling them was right and truthful and that their
mother was an honorable person. Truth is the foundation of everything that we as Latter-day Saints believe in. Our religion is founded on truth, the gospel truth. But there are other virtues that are so closely connected to truth, that when you embrace truth, they come along with it. They go hand in hand. Things like integrity, loyalty, kindness, consideration, caring, commitment, compassion, confidence, consideration, courage. You get the idea. They all fold in together. They are a package as you live truthfully. By definition, a virtue is “a positive trait or quality deemed to be morally good and thus valued as a foundation of principle and good moral being.” Personal virtues are characteristics valued as promoting collective and individual greatness.

In business, as well as in our personal lives, it is really important to build our reputation on things that matter. Larry and I met when we were twelve years old. We were in junior high school and we started dating in the ninth grade and we dated all through high school, so we grew up together. We got married when we were 21. When we got married, I was working, he was working, and we created a home. We were very independent and we relied on each other for everything. We didn’t feel like we needed to go back to our parents and have them help us with anything. We felt very capable. Larry was a softball player, and one day early in our marriage, he wanted to go to Colorado Springs to see a regional tournament because he wanted to play at that level. We had a four-month-old son, we had a convertible that was our only car, and we had very little money, so we drove to Colorado Springs with our four-month-old baby in the back in a carrier. We went to a ballpark, stayed overnight in the car, got up the next morning, watched the ball tournament, and then drove back home. On the way home from Colorado Springs, we were approaching Rock Springs, Wyoming, when the car ran out of gas and Larry thought, “I know it is not too far to Rock Springs. I can push the car up and then we can just kind of coast into town and get some gas.” He started pushing and it became quite a feat. He didn’t want to leave us out on the highway, it was the middle of the night, and it was too far to push the car, so he decided the only thing he could do was flag down another motorist. The first car that came
along was an El Camino with two gas tanks in the back, one diesel and one gasoline. He flagged him down and said, “I have run out of gas. Can you help me?” The guy said, “Well, sure. That is not a problem. I have gas in the back of my truck. Are you sure you are out of gas?” Larry said, “Yeah, I am sure I am.” They put a little in the carburetors in the car and some in the tank and the car started right up. Then Larry said, “Oh, I am so grateful. What can I do to repay you?” The man said, “Oh, nothing. I am grateful to be able to help you. Don’t worry about it.” And he started to get back in his car. He got one leg in the car and he got back out and he said, “You know, there is something you can do for me. The next time you see someone who has run out of gas, stop and help them.” That, again, was a turning point in our life. It was one of those things that was an aha moment. Everyone runs out of gas at some time in their life, literally or figuratively. That made such an impact on us that it began a way of living, and we looked for ways to show people that we cared enough to lend them some gas.

Early in our marriage, we had many jobs and many opportunities to build a career, but nothing took off right away. After a while we decided that we would move to Colorado since Larry had an offer to play softball over there. While we were there, we worked for a store called Stevinson Toyota. Larry was their first parts manager and he was charged with building up the parts department to be a world-class parts department. He took his talents and said, “I know I don’t have a college education, I know I don’t have any particular training. I know that I have two children and one on the way. I know that in order to support them I have to be the very best at something.” So he became the very best parts man that Toyota had ever had. He became what they called a “million-dollar man.” He sold a million dollars’ worth of parts in one year before anyone else in the whole Toyota system had done that. Then the next year, he sold two million dollars’ worth. He worked very hard and he worked systematically. He worked to be able to be the best at what he could be. While he was doing that 90 hours a week, I was left to take care of the children, run the home, and do everything else that needed to be done. I was willing to do that. One of the things that was so easy for us was to be able to work together for a
common goal and do what we needed to do to get things to move forward. While we were there, Larry had opportunities to get advancements. From the parts department, he became the general manager of the Toyota store and then the operations manager over five stores. Every time he had an increase in responsibility, he got an increase in pay. But we were very frugal and so when he had that extra paycheck, we put it in the bank and eventually we had enough money to invest in some land. We felt like we were being very sensible and frugal and capable.

One day, his boss came to him and said, “Larry, I really appreciate what you have done for me. You have done a great job; you have built up our company, given us the reputation we are looking for, but I have eight sons and five dealerships and I want my sons to come into the business. What I need you to do is to go back to the Toyota store and take some of my sons and teach them the business.” He knew right then that that was going to change his career path in Colorado, but he was willing to do it because he respected this man, he appreciated what he had done for him, and he was willing to teach his sons the car business. What he knew was, there was no future for him in that direction anymore. After he had done what his boss asked him to do, we happened to come to Salt Lake City for a vacation. While we were here, he went to lunch with a friend of his who happened to own a Toyota store that Larry had approached him about buying many times, but had always been told, “No, it is not for sale.” That day Larry said to him, “When are you going to sell me your store?” Hugh said, “How about today?” Total shock.

By the way, I don’t normally tell this part of the story. When we moved to Colorado, we were not active in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We were what you call inactive. We had become inactive because we had both been busy with our work and we had been busy dating and we worked on Sunday and it was easy to fall away, so we just went into inactivity. Then we got married, had our kids, Larry played softball, and there was no time on Sunday to go to church. We thought we were okay. We had the basics. When we moved to Colorado, we had been there a few months when our oldest son said, “Mommy, where does God live?” I knew right then that I had
been denying him the opportunity to learn about his Heavenly Father and all of those precious truths that every child has a right to know. So I found our ward, I got the children enrolled in Primary, met with the Primary president and of course, she notified the bishop. The bishop called and asked if he could come out and visit us. I asked Larry and he said, “It is okay if he comes, but I won’t be there.” He was not ready to come back to church.

As we were advancing in our career path, I was advancing in the church path and I got back into church. Every time I would go to church, I knew I was going home. I had these deep feelings of loving and longing and desire to be back in the fold. Taking my children back was a great experience for me, but all I could do was to share what I was discovering with Larry and hope that he would see the joy and what it could bring into our lives again. His history was that his parents had left the church when he was about 16, so he had no support in his family and did not go on a mission. It was a little easier for him to stay away because he had other commitments. What I did was continually ask him to church activities so little by little, the home teachers would come, the Relief Society sisters would come, I would invite him to activities, and the bishop, who was the first bishop that talked to us, became very good friends with Larry. The bishop understood that it takes patience to bring someone back. Then that bishop was called to be a stake president and the new bishop took over and he was just as good and very kind and gentle. As I was coming back into the church, the bishop was working on Larry and one day he called him in and said, “Larry, I think it is time that you had a calling.” Larry said, “I don’t have much time on Sundays.” He said, “Well, how much time do you have?” He said, “I play softball 32 times a year. So maybe however many Sundays are left.” Bishop said, “I will take them.” He asked him to be the volleyball coach for the young men. It was just enough to get Larry hooked, and something he enjoyed doing: working with young people.

From there, he was asked to be a young men’s teacher. Little by little he came back into the fold up to the time I just got to in the business story, 1979 (we moved over in 1970 so it took us eight and a half years to get to this point). In 1979 when we came
back to Salt Lake, we were just about ready to go the temple and be sealed for time and all eternity with our five children. In 1980 on our 15th wedding anniversary, we were sealed in the temple. That was a really glorious day and what I realized that day was that there is a whole new world that we don’t even know about until we go to the temple. It was something that we longed for but didn’t know until we got there. The important part along with that is that Heavenly Father was watching over us all the time. He knew our hearts and he knew where we were going and what we should have been doing. When the opportunity came to buy a dealership in Utah, because we had been frugal in Colorado and invested our money, we had $88,000 available to us to use as a down payment on that dealership. Now of course, that wasn’t enough. He had an uncle that was willing to become partners with us and we were able to buy that dealership. On April 21 he made the deal, and on May 1, 1979, he was here running the dealership and the children and I came a little bit later.

We realized from the very beginning that doing things right was the only way to do them. In spite of not being active in the church, we had always tried to live right, to do things that were aboveboard, that were based on values, that were kind and good and had integrity. That is what we built the business on when it came time to run our own business. It was a scary proposition for me to go from getting a paycheck from a boss, to being the boss and giving out paychecks. That was very different and I was worried about it, but I knew that if anybody could do it, Larry could do it. We built our business on our personal values. We started working with 30 employees in one dealership, thinking that was where we would be, that would be our security and we would make a go of it. We would do well with what we had, we would take care of those 30 employees, and we would be an influence in the community for good. That is what we were settled on. Because we made a reputation for ourselves, other opportunities came our way. He had a person call from Idaho and say, “I understand you own the dealership in Utah. I have heard of your reputation and am ready to sell. I would like to know if you want to buy.” We always described it as a stewardship. Heavenly Father was giving us some responsibility
because he knew what we would do with it and he opened doors for us to walk through and take on more responsibility.

By the time 1985 came around and the opportunity to buy the Utah Jazz came, we were pretty well established in our business world. Now what we didn’t have, what Larry didn’t do was his own advertising and he had a man that did it. When it came time to buy the Utah Jazz and word got out that it might be Larry Miller, everybody thought it was the man that did the advertising. It kept us kind of low-key. Larry knew that the resource of the Utah Jazz was something that was very good for the community. We were not into basketball at the time. We had maybe been to two games as guests with someone else. But we understood that having the Utah Jazz in Salt Lake City was good for the community, good for business, good for tax base, good for a lot of reasons, but it was still way beyond our net worth. Larry was concerned about taking on so much debt. He felt like he needed to go talk to President Hinckley. He was driving around the Church Office Building and called President Hinckley’s office. President Hinckley was then acting as president because President Benson was so ill. He got his secretary and said, “You know, I really would like the opportunity to talk to President Hinckley about a business deal I am looking at. Is he available?” She looked at his calendar and said, “He has about 10 minutes in 5 minutes if you can be here.” Larry said, “I am right outside, so I will be right in.” He went in and talked to President Hinckley. Larry explained to him what he was looking at and what he was thinking and what he was feeling about it. President Hinckley got right to the point. He was an astute business man. He said, “Larry, there are some things that I need to discuss with you on this issue. Number one, you need to be very careful about taking on debt. If you feel like you can handle it, then that is something I think you need to really look at. Number two, if you do this, you have to realize that you will be living life in a fishbowl. Everything you do will be scrutinized by everybody who sees it and you will have to be careful about how you live: be honest, have integrity, do everything that you should do and do it right. The third thing that you need to understand is that it is very, very important to the church that the
Jazz stay in Utah.” Larry said, “Why is that?” He said, “Well, one reason is that all over the world, NBA scores are reported and when people hear the word ‘Utah’ they think Mormons. So when they think ‘Utah Jazz’ they are going to think, ‘Oh, Salt Lake City, Mormons, Utah Jazz.’ The reputation will be good. Besides that, in years to come, you will be able to come back and tell me why it was good for the Jazz to be in Utah.”

I want to tell you a little story about what happened to solidify that thought in our minds. In 1997 or 1998, I am not sure which year, but we went to the playoffs in both years. During the playoffs, there was a young man that wrote us a letter that said, “I need to let you know of an experience I had. I live in Los Angeles, but I am not a Lakers fan. I have always watched the Jazz because I think they are better players, and I like the way they behave, I like the way they conduct themselves, and I like the way they represent, so I have always been a Utah Jazz fan. I came to Salt Lake City trying to get in to see one of the playoff games, but of course it was sold out, so I had to go buy a ticket from a scalper. Out on the street the scalper had two tickets and he said, ‘Come on man, these are the best tickets in the arena! You will sit right on the corner where the players come in, Karl Malone will give you a high-five, they are going to come from behind and win the game in the last five minutes, and on the way out he is going to throw his wrist band to you and high five you again—you are going to have a great time!’” This guy said, “Yeah right.” But he bought the tickets and it was exactly the way that was described. He sat on the corner, Karl Malone gave him a high five, they won the game coming from behind in the last five minutes, Malone threw him the wristband, and he had a great time. He said, “But that wasn’t the best part. The next day I went over to Temple Square and I went through the visitors’ center and what I felt there was so wonderful that I had to know more about your church and I have joined the church and am grateful for the example that you have been through the Utah Jazz.” We have had many letters like that that have given us the opportunity to peek behind the curtains and see how the Utah Jazz have affected communities and people all over the world. It is very important that you live the way you know is right.
After Larry died, I thought, “What do I do with my life now? How do I figure out who I am by myself? How do I know what I am supposed to do?” During our lifetime together, Larry had shared with me every night things that went on in the business. He had always given me an opportunity to know what he was doing, how much he was doing, what his future plans were, how he handled things, who he dealt with, how things should be done. In fact, a year and a half before he died, he called the children together and we sat around the table and he gave us each a notebook and he said, “You are going to want to take notes because I am going to download to you everything you need to know in my absence.” Now at that time, we didn’t know he was as sick as he was, but he was preparing for the future and he knew that what he had built was too precious to leave to happenstance. He had created somewhat of a curriculum and every week we would talk about things he had done and how he had done them and why he had done them. As that went on, Larry, being the student, the teacher, the leader, and the mentor, created in all of us the same kind of attitude that he had had about how valuable what we had created was to the communities we were in and how it needed to be preserved and taken care of.

When he died, even though I had all those other thoughts, I knew that I needed to do whatever it took to continue that legacy. I stepped in as the person who was in charge of making sure the company remained viable. What I realized then, but hadn’t articulated in my own mind, was that we were built on a value base; we were built on hard work, and we were built on integrity, stewardship and service, and those were the things we needed to preserve in our company and our family and our communities. We worked very hard to do that. Then I realized, we have grown so big that we have come from 30 employees to 11,000 employees, half of that since Larry’s death. There were so many people in our company that didn’t know Larry and hadn’t had the opportunity to work with him and understand how passionate he was about what he did and how important it was to maintain the values and the base that we had built, that I had to do something to preserve that. I talked with my youngest son who was a writer and loves to create and we talked about how we would preserve
what we had. How would we make sure that everyone in our company—people who didn’t know Larry, people who would never meet Larry, people who worked in other states—how would we make sure everyone understands what we stand for? We actually have businesses in 45 states, so it was important for us to capture all of that as a legacy. We created a program called Who We Are, which is a curriculum to train and teach all of our employees the values and foundation of our business and how we expect them to conduct themselves, to keep the business on that kind of a footing and to carry forward the legacy that we have built.

In addition to that, I realized that the other thing I had to do was create an opportunity for this company to last for many, many years. I knew from going through some of Larry’s papers that he had planned at some point to create a board. Up to that point, we had always been just run by a management company or managers, but I felt like in order to stay viable we needed an outside board so that things could move from one generation to another in a systematic, sensible way and that we didn’t lose anything in the transfer. That is what I am about right now, making sure I have a corporate government, a succession and transition plan, and that our family is organized in way that they all have an opportunity to learn the values and create a life for themselves, should they wish to be in the company.

I have asked myself many, many times, “Why have I been so blessed and why have we been so successful?” The answer to that always comes back to me that we are virtue based. Then I say, “What virtue have I practiced that has led to the success in my life or made a difference for someone else? How did living the virtues or values that we live help us create what we have created?” Now those are rhetorical questions because I have just told you all the answers. Everything we did and everything we are came from inside, a conviction that we could be and do something extraordinary because we were willing and able to recognize what made us tick and put those things into action. I think it is important that we recognize that until we take the time to take an inventory of what our values are, they largely go unrecognized. You may live them, but once you know them and recognize them and own them,
they get stronger and they get more valuable. Preparation for life has to be deliberate or you just get what is left over. You have to live your life on purpose and you have to live your life according to what you know is true. You need to search your heart and soul to identify your virtues and then name them out loud. Once you take the time to do that, they are yours. You can use them to your advantage to do good things, to have a joyful life, to make other people’s lives joyful, to raise your family, to be successful in business, to have a choice relationship with your spouse, to love your fellow man, to have peace of mind, to create happiness, and to serve the Lord.

We can know if we are becoming virtuous people by the way other people respond to us: our friends, our families, our coworkers, our neighbors. They will trust us and rely on us. They will come to us for guidance and help. They will want to be around us because we inspire them to be better. We will be known as people with exceptional character who make the right choices and strive for excellence in all that we do. Can life be any better than that? The practice of virtues allows us to develop our potential and live a more purposeful, better life—a life not ordinary, but extraordinary. Becoming more virtuous attracts great things to us. That is a certainty. “The best thing you can give to your enemy is forgiveness; to an opponent, tolerance; to a friend, your heart; to your child, a good example; to a father, deference; to your mother, conduct that will make her proud of you; to yourself, respect; to all men, charity.”²

I would like to share with you a poem that really emphasizes what Larry and I have tried to do in our business world, and that is to be a bridge builder for other people, to be able to give them an opportunity to have the things that we have had, to be able to create opportunities for other people. Like I said in the beginning, if we have something that we can share, we have to share it. This is the Bridge Builder:³

An old man going a lone highway,
Came, at the evening cold and gray,
To a chasm vast and deep and wide.
Through which was flowing a sullen tide.
The old man crossed in the twilight dim,
The sullen stream had no fear for him;
But he turned when safe on the other side
And built a bridge to span the tide.
“Old man,” said a fellow pilgrim near,
“Your journey will end with the ending day,
You never again will pass this way.
Why build this bridge at evening tide?”

The builder lifted his old gray head;
“Good friend, in the path I have come,” he said,
“There followed after me to-day
A youth whose feet must pass this way.
This chasm that has been as naught to me
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be;
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building this bridge for him!”

We all have the opportunity
to build bridges. We all have the
opportunity to be examples. We all
have the opportunity to be leaders.
We all have the opportunity to do
something good. Never, ever turn
away from that opportunity.

Notes
THE WHEATLEY INSTITUTION