

## YOU JUST HAVE TO LOVE

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Among my earliest childhood memories was a strong desire to go to the Celestial Kingdom. It was a natural part of being raised in an active LDS family, and I tried hard to be “really good”. However, as I grew older and learned more about what was required, I began to worry. What chance did I actually have of attaining such a lofty goal? I mean, you had to be perfect to go there!

After serving a mission I met my husband at BYU and we married in the temple. I had always wanted to be a mother, but I hadn't anticipated the overwhelming love I felt for our first little son, David. He filled our lives with delight and wonder. His bright mind and charming ways promised a happy future. I urgently desired to help him get to the Celestial Kingdom, too.

Over the next nine years I gave birth to five more precious children. Meeting their needs created a stressful world for me, but I loved them more than I had ever dreamed possible. I tried desperately to make them do everything right so we could all go to the Celestial Kingdom together. Sometimes I met with stiff resistance, but I diligently persisted. We attended all our church meetings and activities, paid generous offerings, had family prayer and scripture time, and I over-magnified my callings. Unfortunately, I was also buried in guilt because I often caught myself yelling at my children. But what could I do? I was sure we would never be happy if we didn't do everything right. My fears intensified as I envisioned myself approaching the doors of the Celestial Kingdom and watching them slam in my face because I wasn't good enough after all.

By the time David reached his mid-teens, he had become defiant and secretive. Most mornings, I had to drag him out of bed and take him to school. On the way I usually reprimanded him angrily for the inconvenience he was causing me, and for the problems he was creating for himself. Occasionally we shared a loving moment, but most often we were engaged in bitter conflict. He sought refuge with his friends.

One day David nervously approached me and said, “Mom, I want to tell you something before you hear it from someone else. I'm gay. I've known it for a long time. All my friends are gay. I just wanted you to know because I'm tired of hiding it.” With that, he ran out the door and hopped into his friend's car. They sped away, leaving me in a total twilight zone.

My mind raced wildly as I tried to comprehend David's words. “What am I going to do? I can't tell anyone. We have to move away and not let anyone know where we are. We won't be able to tell anyone we are Mormons. I've failed the church and I've failed my family. I'm not even worthy to be a member of the church because I have a gay son.” I desperately wanted to pray, but I couldn't. What could I possibly say to God? I had failed Him miserably and I was sure He was terribly disappointed in me. I wished I could die.

I had known many dark days, but at that point my world went totally black. I cried endlessly, and constantly asked myself what I had done wrong. How had I let this precious little boy's life turn into such a tragedy? Maybe if I hadn't been so cross, maybe if I hadn't been so busy with my church callings, maybe if we hadn't let him get a job, maybe if I had listened more, maybe if I had been more understanding. The questions and self-accusations never ended. I felt desperately

lonely, but I was too ashamed to share my pain. I stopped writing in my journal, because I felt if I wrote anything down, it would become permanent.

As the tearful days dragged into months, I realized I had to get some help. I made an appointment and cautiously discussed my situation with our doctor. He was kind, but I continued to be miserable. Finally I gathered the courage to tell my sister, and also my walking partner, Margaret. What a relief it was to share my secret with them and feel their outpouring of love and support!

One day I was on the phone with Margaret discussing a mutual friend's plans to donate a kidney to her fifteen year old son. "They say the surgery is usually very hard on the donor," I told her. "She's making a huge sacrifice, especially considering all the younger children she has to care for." My words surprised Margaret. "Sure it would be hard," she said, "but I'd do it in a heartbeat for one of my kids, and so would you." Without thinking, I said, "I would for any of them but David."

Instantly, I was frozen in time, stunned as those words echoed repeatedly through my mind. I clumsily ended the phone conversation as new words clearly came to me. "In the last days the hearts of the mothers will turn cold." I crumbled to my knees in anguish. "Heavenly Father, please help me!" I begged. "Have I actually become a cold-hearted mother? I can't believe I said I would let David die!" My heart was truly broken, and I wept bitterly.

I remained on my knees for a long time, pleading for some kind of solace. Finally, words of comfort came, laced with a gentle reproach. "You are not a cold-hearted mother. You are just hurt. But think how much more David is hurting. You have friends and family who stand by you and support you. He has no one to turn to. He feels rejected by his family, by his church, and by everyone who has known him." As I pondered this new insight, a penetrating sadness crept over me—this time for my son instead of for myself.

"But Heavenly Father," I cried, "What can I do? I don't understand anything about homosexuality! How can I possibly be a good mother for him?"

"You don't have to understand. You just have to love."

"Well, I can do that!" I responded. "I can love!" I had loved many troubled kids over the years—nieces, nephews, children of friends, young people from church. My burden lifted and for the first time in a very long time, my heart knew hope. I lingered on my knees, rejoicing in God's pure love for me and for David. I arose renewed, filled with gratitude for my new perspective.

At first, David was suspicious of my change of attitude. We still had many conflicts, but I constantly prayed for guidance and for the ability to retain the feelings of love I had been given. I encouraged him to bring his friends home and I embraced them all, whether they had purple hair, nose rings, spiked leather jackets, chains, black lipstick – or all of it together. It was difficult for me to stop nagging about school, but when David explained how unsafe he felt there, I realized it was not a good place for him after all. He withdrew from high school and completed the requirements for an alternate diploma.

Though we continued to encounter a variety of challenges, the change in our relationship was remarkable. I had no idea what lay ahead, but I was optimistic. Several months later, however, as I was sitting alone at my kitchen table this thought sprang into my mind: "But you can never be truly happy because all of your children will never be married in the temple." Suddenly I was drowning in a pool of despair as the thought repeated relentlessly, "I'm never going to be happy.

I'm never going to be happy. I'm never going to be happy." Complete hopelessness consumed me and it seemed all my progress had been swept away forever. But then just as suddenly, something deep inside me snapped. I sprang from my chair and shouted, "Oh, yah? I can't live if I can't be happy! I'm just going to have to be happy no matter what!"

My unexpected outburst shocked me, but in that instant I knew without question that my happiness was in my own hands. It didn't depend on my children, my husband, or my external circumstances. This new knowledge burned in the very core of my being. I was finally able to allow myself to be happy! I was finally free!

A profound peace filled my soul. It strengthened and comforted me when David, still only seventeen, decided to move to Salt Lake City. Loading his bed, dresser, and personal belongings into our van tugged at my heart. Depositing them in a cheap, barren apartment with dusty pipes running everywhere was even harder. He had no job, a questionable roommate, and far more freedom than I would have preferred. As I tearfully embraced him to say our final farewell, he seemed nervous and unsettled, but he insisted it was what he wanted to do.

We didn't see David often, and after a few years, he moved to Texas to stay with a friend, who soon became his partner. Two years later they moved to New York City. David called sporadically to share his experiences. When he and his partner argued, he would often seek my advice. I always tried to be loving and supportive, but sometimes I found it quite difficult. I was especially challenged during the few occasions when he came home to visit. He was generally edgy and easily upset. I felt guilty that I liked having him live far away. I was afraid I was losing the gift of love God had given me.

About five years after David's move to New York, I learned a new way of studying the scriptures. I quickly came to understand what it means to truly "feast upon the words of Christ." I accepted Christ's invitation to "come unto me, all ye that are heavy laden," and I joyfully received the promised rest. Sometimes I felt so overcome with gratitude that I would hold my scriptures and tenderly stroke the columns of words or lift them to my cheek and gently rest my face on the open pages. As I earnestly studied and prayed, the Spirit continually bore witness to me of Christ's pure love for me and for each of God's children, regardless of where or how they live. I realized that Christ offers us a straight path to Him, but that He also freely allows us to take whatever path we choose, so we can learn by our own experience. As I recorded my thoughts and feelings in my journal, an abundance of love and guidance flowed into my life. Looking back, I clearly see that the Lord was preparing me for what was coming next.

I got a call from David a few months before the World Trade Center attack in September of 2001. We talked about his recent health problems and his declining business. He wasn't anxious to return to Utah, but we discussed the possibility of him coming home just long enough to regain his health. "It wouldn't be easy for you," I warned him. "Grandma is now living with us, and she is pretty vocal about homosexuality." We made no definite plans, but after the Trade Center attack, David's business collapsed completely. "I have a couple of relocation possibilities that look promising," he said, "but could I come home and recuperate for just a few weeks while I decide what to do? Grandma and I can survive for that long, and I will be fine sleeping on the floor." Though I wondered what "a few weeks" might mean, the spirit undeniably directed us to welcome him back into our home.

Coming home proved to be an extremely difficult adjustment for David. It brought up a lot of anger about his past and about how my husband and I had parented him. There was constant

hostility between him and my mother. He needed to talk out a lot of things, and we spent many long hours engaged in intense conversation. Sometimes he'd push me to defend myself, but I found I could calmly flow with his barrage of emotions as long as I maintained my new pattern of consistent prayer, scripture study and journaling. I listened to his accusations without feeling attacked and was often prompted to offer an apology and ask for forgiveness.

While living in New York, David embraced Tibetan Buddhism and I was delighted to find we had many common beliefs. However, we still strongly disagreed on many political and religious issues. I was blessed with an ever-present feeling of peace and love as we continued to hash things over, and we gradually developed a strong mutual respect. Months later, during one of our discussions David paused and gazed at me for a moment. Then he thoughtfully said, "Mom, you practice your religion differently now."

"I understand my religion differently now," I replied.

I have had countless opportunities to know the joy of practicing my religion differently. Besides being blessed with calmness in the face of criticism, I have also often been blessed to release my desire for control. It has taken so much stress from my life. For example, David picked up a smoking habit while he was gone. I know I would have felt distraught and compelled to lecture him before, but not anymore. He always went outside to smoke and was careful to see that I wasn't around. One night when I knew he was feeling deeply troubled, I stepped outside just as he lit a cigarette. "Mom," he said through the darkness, "I'm smoking. I don't want you to see me smoking." I slowly walked over and sat next to him on the swing. I put my hand on his knee and leaned my head on his shoulder. After a brief hesitation, he poured out his grief to me. As I listened, I felt honored that he trusted me enough to share his heartache. He rarely smokes anymore. He knows I think it's a bad habit, but more importantly, he knows I love him whether he smokes or not.

Another example would be dealing with David's language when he is angry. Before he left home, we had numerous heated arguments about his inappropriate word choices. Although he generally respects my standards now, I recently made a comment about an event from his teenage years which triggered fierce emotion and a stream of foul language. It was obvious that heavy fear and pain still surrounded the event as it replayed itself in his mind. He raged on for several minutes before finally allowing me to put my arms around him. "I'm sorry you felt so abandoned and vulnerable when that happened," I said. His language was simply a non-issue. The following day he talked to me about his explosive response. He said he watched himself like a runaway train as he heard his angry words spew forth.

So much healing has taken place as David's time at home has extended from "a few weeks" to more than four years. These years have given him the opportunity to develop a loving relationship with each of his siblings and with his nieces and nephews. One of my favorite miracles has been the transformation of his relationship with my mother, which only happened once I quit trying to resolve the tension between them. I never cease to be thrilled by their frequent hugs and playful teasing.

I'm sure I don't yet recognize all the goodness that has come into my life because of this journey. I only know I wouldn't change it even if I could. It has taken me from a place of fear to a place of trust. I no longer feel compelled to "herd" my family to the Celestial Kingdom. And I no longer worry about those celestial doors slamming in my face. I'm on the path, and I can walk forward in peace and joy as I honor my children's agency, for "I know in whom I have trusted."

How worthy he is of that trust! Indeed, as Nephi said, “My God has been my support; he hath led me through mine afflictions.” He will lead each of us as we invite Him into our hearts. We do not have to understand all things. Sometimes we just have to love.

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