



The Faith of Our Fathers: More Than Tradition

By Andrew Richards

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How is faith passed on to children? A parent's lived faith creates lasting impressions deeper than doctrine or tradition.

One of the most significant aspects of parenting, and most daunting, is the role we take in shaping who our children grow up to be. We model beliefs and behavior. The associations they build from what they observe and what they experience alongside their parents necessarily leave a lasting impact. In a culture where religious identity is in decline, it's important, then, for parents to understand that the faith story they live is the one their children will one day tell. Our faith tradition offers rich opportunities for parents to transmit religious identity regardless of what our own faith journey has been.

As the son of a convert, my father's faith journey has often been something I've considered while I reflect on my own. This has been especially true as I recently entered

fatherhood myself.

My father attended church when he was a child, until his parents divorced. No reason was given for their sudden non-attendance; it was just another outcome of their shifting lives. When he started dating my mother in college, and observed her family ending the day together with scripture study and prayer, it stood out to him as a “good practice.”

Whenever I’ve heard my father share the story of his conversion to the Church, that story always began with that visit. He later gained a testimony of the Book of Mormon and joined the Church shortly after they got married. They were 19. What began as a fondness for family values he craved to cultivate evolved into a simple testimony of core truths.

By the time I came along, the third of five children, the gospel as taught by our church had saturated my father so completely that even today I cannot imagine one without the other.

Growing up, I knew the gospel because I knew my parents. This mirrored relationship between my parents and the gospel they raised me in extended into my teenage years. I wrestled with my faith like any adolescent wrestles with their parents. Was I too sheltered? Was I confined by circumstance into being religious? Was my devotion to the Church just about finding comfort in familiarity? Like any teenager, what I really longed for was personal identity.

While my father did not serve a mission, I knew I wanted to because I knew that was where I could make my own relationship with the gospel. And in many ways, my mission is sacred to me because that is exactly what happened. But even while I was in Brazil, my missionary service was marked by thoughts like, “How would I be serving if my father were my companion?” While it almost feels like it happened by accident, I know I would not have

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It's been a decade since I returned from my mission.

Today, my faith is deeply personal. It has evolved in ways I could not have expected. Because of this, I'm sensitive about respecting others in their own expressions and observances. If I'm being honest, the personal nature of my own testimony has made it hard for me to know how to teach the gospel as a matter of principle, the way I had as a missionary.

While my son will be a third-generation member on my side, his mother is “pioneer stock.” He will have more cultural and generational support than anyone in my family. Neither of my parents served missions. Both of his did. He has two sets of grandparents who have entire lifetimes marked by gospel living. While I've always reflected on the way my father's conversion inevitably led to my own, I wonder what about my conversion will impact him.

I worry how, within the context of my shortcomings, I will raise him to understand the gospel, so that he can truly choose it for himself. I don't want him to merely grow up grounded in a denomination or steeped in a theology of my making. I want him to grow into a relationship with his Savior, trusting everything else will flow from there. I know that is the only way it will become something that is truly his. Just as my father's faith is his, and mine my own.

My father was right when he described what he observed in the home of his future in-laws as a “good practice.”

Research shows that [religious transmission is stronger](#) where families engage in this kind of religious socialization. This is significant, [given how three-in-ten adults are now religiously unaffiliated](#). This is almost double what was reported less than 20 years ago—a trend that's expected to continue. One [survey](#) finds that teenagers are nearly three times as likely to attend church with one or both parents—and even among those who express they participate in religious services because their parents want them to, 79% report that they at least somewhat enjoy attending. We can observe that [actively religious people self-report as](#)

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happier, by a margin of 11% in the United States. That same survey notes that religiously active individuals are 19% more likely to belong to at least one non-religious organization.

But more important than that is the living testimony that believing parents pass on to their children on where they can turn to grow a relationship with Christ.

When we read of Lehi's own account of his dream, we read that the first thing that happens to him after being filled with joy by the fruit of the Savior's love is that he "began to be desirous that [his] family should partake of it also; for [he] knew that it was desirable above all other fruit." I don't know how successful I will be as a parent. But I am grateful to have examples, in the scriptures and in life, who show me that the measure of a successful parent is the Savior's love we reflect back to our children. If we show them, and invite them, then as Lehi's son Jacob later taught—they too can be free to choose.

About the author

Andrew Richards

Andrew Richards is a Latter-day Saint and an attorney. He currently practices both in Tucson, Arizona.