

Healing From Sexual Abuse

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My dear brothers and sisters, aloha! This is an unusual experience for me; the conference organizers asked me to speak to you today giving an address I prepared for a regional women's conference in Portland, Oregon, in the late fall of 1992. That was ten years ago. So this is something of an anniversary for me. A few weeks later, in January of 1993, at the request of Sheri Dew, I taped this talk for Deseret Book. It sold thousands of copies, and even today nearly everywhere I speak, one or two or more women come up afterwards and quietly say to me, "Thank you for that tape. It helped me a lot." I love the text to be published in a compilation of addresses titled *Disciples* that Deseret Book brought out in September of 1998, and here I am, giving this address again.

I am indeed honored to be asked, honored to participate in this assignment, and I am greatly saddened by the fact that the information in this talk still keenly relevant to so many members of the Church today. I have never experienced sexual abuse, nor has anyone in my family, but many friends, acquaintances, and troubled Relief Society sisters have honored me with their confidences. President Hinckley and President Monson have condemned this shocking sin in strong terms that brought it sharply to our awareness. In April conference this year, both President Hinckley and President Packer again repudiated this grievous sin. President Hinckley as recently as General Conference earlier this month denounced such sexual abuse again, warning that those who committed it could face action on their membership. I personally believe that the growing awareness of and resistance to sexual abuse in the fulfillment of the scripture which says, "There is nothing covered that shall not be revealed, neither hid that shall not be known. Therefore,

whatsoever ye have spoken [and I would add, have done] in darkness shall be heard in the light, and proclaimed upon the housetops." Each survivor who tells her or his story, each individual who reports abuse, each police officer who arrests a perpetrator, each judge and jury who enforce the law, and each person who teaches children to protect themselves and to report abuse are part of fulfilling this prediction of Jesus Christ about the last days. This evil must be exposed before it can be repented of, and it must be repented of.

Brothers and sisters, let me share with you how I came to speak on this topic. I was the first counselor of the general presidency in the Relief Society at that time, and when I was invited to speak in Portland, I asked the stake Relief Society president about her concerns and the needs of the women in that area. When she sent me the list, one topic leaped out at me: sexual abuse. I felt a burden laid upon me from the Spirit that this was the message I was to speak in Portland. This was a very difficult thing for me to do. When I speak of love or faith or service or sisterhood, I often sense an easing of burdens and brightening in the feelings of those I address. Would this topic add to the burdens and intensify the pain of those who were already suffering? Did I know enough to be helpful, or would I injure those through clumsiness and ignorance? I fasted and prayed. I thought deeply and continually during the period of preparation. I consulted the stake president in the area. Most of all, I sought the Spirit of the Savior, that I would fulfill the responsibility laid upon me in the way that he would have me to do, that I would speak with clarity and with comfort for my own place of love and trust, that I could put an arm around a struggling sister and for a few steps help her walk the long, painful path of spiritual healing. My prayers were

answered. In Portland I discovered that I had come to a place and a people prepared to hear this message. Several groups were already dealing explicitly with the support and healing of survivors. Priesthood leaders were informed, understanding, and supportive. I felt heard. People told me that they understood my message and felt the witness of the Spirit. It was both a sobering and an uplifting experience for me, and it has continued. I pray deeply and sincerely that the same Spirit will attend this occasion.

The case of physical or sexual abuse poses particular challenges. In such cases, we have to develop simultaneously protection against the abuse, shape a pattern of life for ourselves that means we do not become immoral and abusive in turn, and finally develop the ability to forgive those who have violated our agency and damaged our trust. I have chosen to focus on trust because I think that out of all the consequences of abuse, out of the pain and grief and shame and hurt and anger and sorrow and cynicism and rage and withdrawal and rejection of self and rejection of others, out of all these consequences, I think that the loss of trust may be the very worst of all. I want to talk about betrayal of trust in context of sexual abuse, and then talk about how to restore it.

One of the most powerful parts of the gospel for me is its promise of peace. I love the Lord's reassuring words: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." Yet that message, which he spoke to his apostles in Palestine in the context of teaching them about the second comforter, he repeated to Joseph Smith, that imbedded in very troublesome message, the Lord told Joseph Smith: "Therefore renounce war and proclaim peace and seek diligently to turn

the hearts of the children to their fathers and the hearts of the fathers to the children, lest I come and smite the whole earth with a curse and all flesh be consumed before me. Let not your hearts be troubled, for in my father's house are many mansions, and I have prepared a place for you, and where my father and I am, there ye shall be also." Here he talks of war, of the hearts of fathers turned away from their children, of the cursing of the earth and the consuming of all flesh. This is a message that is very relevant, I believe, to sexual abuse. What the Savior told the Saints in a message annunciated in his day and repeated in ours is a very hard message: that war and unloving behavior and trouble and heartbreak and even betrayal are part of human life. We can count on our Heavenly Father, and we can count on the love of Christ as we struggle to love each other, but even at its best, no human love will be perfect. Perhaps betrayal is too harsh a word for most of the difficult experiences that we have. A gentler way of saying it is that everybody is going to let you down. Your spouse is not perfect; your children will disappoint you in some ways. People in your ward won't always be thoughtful and neighborly, but betrayal is not too harsh a word for the situation in which the trust of innocent and powerless children does not protect them against physical and sexual abuse from a parent, a sibling, a teacher, or from another member of the Church, someone, in short, whose responsibility before God is to protect and nurture.

I have eight messages that I want to share about the terrible betrayal of sexual abuse. The first is this: sexual abuse is a problem for all of us, both men and women, whether we have experienced it personally or not. The most conservative statistic I have heard is that one woman in ten is sexually abused before she is eighteen. The worst I have

heard is that the figure is closer to one in three. One in three. A comparable statistic for the sexual abuse of boys is one in ten, and researchers feel that the sexual abuse of boys is even more severely underreported than the sexual abuse of girls. There are no systematic studies of which I am aware done on Mormon men and Mormon women, but those who work with LDS women and men as counselors and therapists say they have no reason to believe that the statistics are any different for them than for the national population.

Now think about the worst statistics: one in three. If you are a woman, it means that you have a 33 percent chance of being that woman. If you are a man, it means that your wife, your mother, or your daughter, may be that woman. If you have three daughters, if you have three sisters, if you have three daughters-in-law, if you have three granddaughters, this terrible evil could have entered your family's life with or without your knowledge. Consider the men in your life. Think about your sons and grandsons, your missionary companions. Did one of them struggle silently with this spiritual burden? If you have worked in three elders' quorum presidencies or bishoprics or stake presidencies, the statistical odds are that one of them bore this grievous, invisible wound. Think of your friends; think of the women sitting in your Relief Society and the men sitting in the priesthood meeting. Think of the children in your Primary. Sexual abuse is a problem for all righteous women and all righteous men everywhere.

The second message is that sexual abuse is not the child's fault. Sometimes we hear statements from people suggesting that sometimes a victim of sexual abuse has some kind of responsibility for the abuse. I asked a woman, a former Relief Society president who had been sexually abused by

her father when she was a child, to help me understand why some people feel that women who are raped or wives who are battered or little girls or boys who with sexual abuse may have done something to cause this evil to come upon them. With her permission, I share her answer. She said, "I think for some, it must have something to do with an understandable desire to believe that parents cannot, and therefore, would not do this without some provocation from their children. I don't know what will help those who want to believe that as Saints we are immune to such impulses." She continues, "I often find myself wondering why even we who know our parents as abusers continue to protect them by idealizing them. At the heart of them, I think it is my child's self-interested hope of escaping pain. She thinks, 'He's not bad; I'm bad. If he's bad, I'm inevitably at risk. If I'm bad, I can be safe because I can stop being bad. If I can believe that I'm making my father do this to me, I can believe that I can make him stop.' Accepting such responsibility," she says, "becomes a way of not feeling the absolute despair of conscious powerlessness and the inevitability of recurring attack without possibility of rescue. Of course," she said, "the hope is in vain, but the time blocked at the price of guilt and shame can save one's sanity. Eventually the little child must go back and feel the despair, but only when she has matured enough to bear it.

Now the third message I have is that women and men who have been sexually abused probably need professional help and certainly need personal support. In the vast majority of cases, they need professional help because sexual abuse, and particularly incest, attacks the very foundation of their identity. They need our personal support because they have learned not to trust other people and not even to trust themselves. Sometimes they have terrible memories

which they deny. Sometimes there are even more terrible gaps in their memories, which they are terrified to explore. Such profound isolation from other people can come close to a kind of insanity.

One man who shared his experiences of being sexually abused by his father told me, “I told all alone at church a lot of the time. In fact, I have not attended my meetings sometimes for up to a year because I cannot face the members.” And then he told about his agony at sitting through a lesson in which our responsibility to forgive was presented as an absolute requirement. When he tried to suggest that sometimes it is not possible to forgive until some healing has taken place, his comment was received judgmentally and without understanding. The teacher rebuked him, and when he tried to explain his feelings, a heated debate developed. He said wistfully, “I wish that I felt safe and accepted during elders’ quorum, but every time I enter that room that I am commanded to go into, I feel as though I’m going in front of a firing squad.” Normal happy voices, respectful listening, and simple trust can sometimes be lifelines. If you have a friend who needs someone to listen, and if you can be a voice of steadfast love for her or him, please accept that burden if you can. If there are things you can’t understand, please ask questions but also acknowledge you may not want to talk about this and that’s okay. We must never seek to know more than a man or woman is willing to share. We must never violate the privacy of survivors as their bodies and their sense of self have been violated in the past, and we must never betray their trust. That would add one more betrayal to the burden they already carry. Please be wise in your support. Don’t take on more than you can handle, and don’t try to become a therapist. Instead encourage your friend to get

professional help while you maintain a close loving contact.

Fourth, women and men who are coming to terms with sexual abuse need all the spiritual help they can get. Pray with them if you wish. Pray for them. Encourage them to seek priesthood blessings. Read the scriptures with them if they wish. Encourage them to read their patriarchal blessings. Attend church functions with them if they need companionship. Go with them to the temple if they want to go. My friend told me that a very important part of her own willingness to start working on her abuse was receiving a blessing from a priesthood holder when she was just beginning to suspect sexual abuse in her past. Her own memories were chaotic and unclear, and she was reluctant to seek the blessings, she says, because, “I needed some guidance from the Lord that I wasn’t able to trust myself to hear. You see, I very much did not want to open a door that could not be closed. I wanted to get on with my life. I feared destroying by my becoming conscious of these things the hard-won and fragile peace in my family, and I was hanging on to the hope that I was making all of this up.” My friend was not making it up, of course, and the priesthood blessing told her things that she did not consciously know about until later. For instance, he told her in the blessing that her mother had played a role in her abuse. Later my friend discovered that her mother did in fact know about the abuse and had refused to help her. Think how much strength you would need to bear that terrible knowledge.

Fifth, those of you who are teachers and leaders have a special role in play in supporting a man or a woman who’s going through the aftermath of abuse. I would hope that every teacher in the Church will remember that in his or her classroom is

almost certainly at least one person who has survived sexual abuse. With that person in mind, think of the stories you tell, the questions that you ask, and perhaps most importantly, the assumptions you make. Think of a seven-year-old girl whose father sexually abuses her. What does she feel when the Primary sings, “I’m so glad when my daddy comes home”? Think of a twelve-year-old boy who is physically and sexually abused by an uncle who is the stake patriarch. How does he deal with his confusion during a lesson which teaches that we should obey our priesthood leaders because they want what is best for us? Think of a woman whose husband beats and rapes her. What feelings go through her mind as a Relief Society teacher explains that it is the wife’s responsibility to maintain the spiritual atmosphere in the home and to support the priesthood? To these confused, despairing children and adults in pain, the teachers speak with the voice of the Church. Such messages have a great potential for increasing their pain and despair. Leaders play an especially important role. Parents and husbands, authority figures, and abusive authority figures may make it seem virtually impossible for someone who has been equally sexually abused to seek help from yet another authority figure. But I have had several survivors of sexual abuse tell me that the consistent concern of a priesthood leader, even when he did not fully understand the issue or what was happening, literally kept them from committing suicide. Blessings and respectful listening are very important. They validate to a survivor that he or she is not making it up and does not have to go through the healing process alone.

My friend shared one specific way in which leaders can perform a very real service for survivors in that situation. She pointed out that self-doubt is one of the inescapable

results of enduring abuse. “That is why,” she continued gently, “it is so painful when others stand at the pulpit and doubt you, too. I think the reassurance of receiving a blessing from a priesthood leader spared me any further delay from the hopeful doubt that the work ahead of me didn’t need to be done. With the blessing I had permission to undertake the cure.” She continues, “That is one enormous contribution Church leaders can make: give permission to take the cure. Release the victims from having to continue to take care of their victimizers. If you wish to challenge the victims of child abuse, do not challenge the reality of their memories or accuse them of being responsible for what happened to them. Rather, challenge them to take responsibility for their own fate while expressing sympathy for the painful undertaking this will be. And always hold out the promise of the Savior that “I am with you even to the end.’ Who can do this better than those who are his witnesses.”

Another woman who had survived years of sexual abuse from her father spoke to me of the dreadful task of healing. I think of the Savior who shuddered because of the suffering, who suffered and bled at every pore, and drew back from the bitter cup, hoping that it was not necessary. He shrank away, but it was necessary. He says, “And I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men.” Children of men is a stock phrase in the scriptures that means all human beings or the human family, but in this context, I hope you will also hear it as a literal phrase, as the little children who have been betrayed and injured at the hands of men, especially who were entrusted with their care. Christ finished his preparations for these children. The time of their physical torment may be over, but the time of their spiritual torment is great. Christ also adds significantly, “Glory be to the father.” For him, accepting and fulfilling

the atonement was a dreadful task, but because he did it, we too can lift the dreadful cup to our lips. The scriptures tell us, “He descended below all things in that he comprehended all things, that he might be in all, and through all things the light of truth, which truth shineth, this is the light of Christ.” It may seem inconceivable that the light of Christ is eradiating and illuminating the horrifying images and memories associated with sexual abuse, but such is his promise. If this is your situation, cling to that promise. Cling to the light, and let it grow stronger.

The sixth message I want to share is that healing from sexual abuse is a very long and very painful process. According to one study that included LDS women, being able to reach the ultimate step of forgiving the perpetrator and moving on took an average of fifteen years. Many women and men who have been sexually abused respond in ways that they cannot control, with irrational fears and compulsive behaviors, even in repeated transgressions. Very often they are so filled with guilt and self-loathing that repentance seems impossible for them. Let me borrow an image from a sensitive bishop who works hard to help members of his ward who have been sexually abused. He urges leaders, family, and friends to realize that their loved one, a ward member, has been injured, just as if he or she had broken a leg that had never been set properly. Even though the person can walk and may have forgotten about the injury, true healing and true strength cannot return until the injury is acknowledged, the bone rebroken, and the leg set correctly. Please recognize and realize that someone who has been sexually abused has been deprived of part of her or his free agency. The individual cannot get it back except through the long and difficult process of healing from sexual abuse. If you are willing to make a commitment to be a

friend during this process, make a long-term commitment. Often when we acknowledge a problem, we want it fixed quickly. We think a few visits to a therapist, a few priesthood blessings, a few tears shed, a few hugs should make everything all right. Not so. The process of healing may be more complex than I realize, different for each survivor, but let me share with you again what my friend says: “It is hard to answer questions that one hasn’t been asked, to explain to people who already think they know, to talk to people who do not talk to you. It is especially hard when their talking to you is an attempt to make the subject go away. I want it to go away, too. I thought it would go away after I woke up screaming in the night, or after it made me so afraid I would throw up over and over, or after I’d recovered the three-year-old and the six-year-old parts of myself, or after I wrote the letter to my father, or after, or after--the pain just ebbs and flows. I am in so much pain that I will do anything to pass through this as efficiently as possible. A lake cannot repent of its pollutants; it can only submit to being dredged and flushed of its debris and poisons. I am learning that the pain is not an end in itself, but it leads me to what I am to learn, and with each lesson, I get more of my life back.”

Now the closing words of her most recent priesthood blessing assured her “that Christ not only sorrows at my suffering, but suffers with me as I suffer. I am amazed at the love he offers me. I also lose what hope I had of escaping my pain any other way than by experiencing it. I wanted to be otherwise; then I remember Alma’s great testimony that Christ will descend below all things that he may succor his people according to their infirmities.” And then she continues, “I remember my own experience of being with someone who is suffering, knowing that it is their fate and that all I can offer is to suffer

with them. Though I would take it away or explain it away or find someone else who would and who could, the Spirit tells me that it cannot be done and that I must stand there in the pain with them in the suffering.”

The seventh point I want to make involves the perpetrator. I realize that women also physically and sexually abuse children. What I saw applies to them as well, but in most cases of sexual abuse involving women, girls, or boys, the perpetrator is male. As women we know the victims and hear their stories, but we also know perpetrators. Most abusers have mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters, yet the secrecy with which we shroud the victim is nothing to the secrecy with which we shroud the perpetrator. When the abuse is incest, that means that a wife and a mother either does not know or chooses not to know what her husband is doing to their child. She may love him and choose to not know what is happening because the knowledge is too painful, because she feels to helpless, because there is too much to lose. Please remember the words of the Savior: “And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and he were cast into the sea.” If you know a perpetrator and if you love him or if you love his victim, set the processes in motion so that the perpetrator can receive help and start on his own process of healing. He needs professional help; he also needs ecclesiastical help, and he has committed a crime which he must answer for in the courts of justice. My friend was born into an LDS family that had been active in the Church for generations on both sides. That lineage did not make her father pure; it did not make her mother brave. It did not protect my friend. I implore you not to shield perpetrators out of mistaken sense of love. I’ve never seen any studies suggesting

that those who sexually abuse children will alter their behavior without direct intervention. We must believe this message. No child in the neighborhood is safe from a sexual abuser. No child or grandchild in a family is safe. In many ways, the whole topic of sexual abuse is strange to me. I feel unskilled in thinking about or in knowing how to help someone who is a survivor. I’m one of the other two women, not the third. I think of my father, of his steadfast willingness to work his life away as a laborer on a plantation in Hawaii to provide for his parents, for my mother, for me and my brothers. I think of his quiet pride in me and the determination he and my mother had that I would get an education even when that meant sending me away from them, even when it meant sending me beyond economic and social level they had reached. I think about my husband, who lived his life for others in the purest expression of Christ-like love I have ever known. I think about my two sons, strong and gentle and loving. My heart is filled with gratitude to the point of overflowing for these men in my life. Then I think about other daughters who are brutally taught that they exist as instruments to serve the twisted sexual needs of their fathers. I think about sons who are abused until they grow up thinking that all fathers torture their sons. I think of wives who live with the threat of physical abuse from their husbands or turn their heads away from the tears of their daughters or other mothers who see their sons grow up to become abusive husbands. I am filled with sorrow.

My eighth message is that we can do much to stop the abuse before it starts by holding the men and women in our lives to gospel standards. I’ve heard the disgusting report that some incestuous fathers justify their vile behavior by saying they are simply carrying out the Church’s instructions to make sex

education a topic that is handled in the home. We can refuse to accept rationalizations and twisted logic. We can label such behavior for the sin and the crime that it is. We can raise sons and daughters who do not make disparaging remarks about other girls or boys or who think that they can bully anyone else just because they are stronger. We can teach children to feel ownership of their own bodies and to trust their feelings. We can insist that our sons respect the young women they date. We can raise daughters who have a sense of themselves and daughters of God too strong to submit to abusive treatments from their husbands. But perhaps most importantly, we can be adults who accept fully our divine identity as children of our Heavenly Father. We can accept and be ennobled by the eternal sacrifice of Christ's atonement, not for someone else, but for us, ourselves. We can refuse to accept abuse, to make excuses for an abuser, or to turn our heads away from those who have suffered abuse. We can refuse to keep the guilty secrets of abusive men and women in our families, our wards, and our neighborhoods who are damaging and destroying innocence.

I have spoken today of us and them as though all of us are the fortunate two or the fortunate nine and as though the one statistical victim of abuse is someone else, a woman or man who is a statistic in another state, a person who is comfortably distant so that we do not have to deal with his or her pain. This is not the impression I want to leave. We are all here together in this Church. We are all here together in this problem, and we must be all part of the solution. How is it possible to reveal trust that has been betrayed? When the fabric of our lives is ripped and wrenched, what will make it whole? Let me use the analogy of a piece of lace or a crocheted dolly or a cat's cradle. All of them begin with a long,

straight thread or string. It becomes complex and beautiful when it touches other parts and other strings, but all of them are fragile. They can be shredded, unraveled, and torn, but we need to remember that there is a pattern. Even if it is damaged, it can be rewoven. Second, each part supports the other parts and is connected to them. You cannot pick one string out without destroying the whole pattern. I am part of the pattern. The bishop who sits with the injured members of the ward while they face the injury and begin healing is part of that pattern. My friend who discovered the abuse buried deep in memories of her childhood is part of the pattern. You are part of this pattern, and the Savior is part of this pattern. I like to think of the Savior's love as filling the spaces in the lace where there is no thread because there wouldn't be a pattern if there weren't spaces. I think of him as the intersections where the threads come together, making something special happen where they touch and connect. We can be part of this network of service and support, and we can be part of the Savior's pattern.

And now how can you build and keep that image in your mind? One thing that helps is to find a scripture that breathes a promise of healing to you or a hymn or a poem. When I was recovering from the sudden death of my beloved husband, who died in the spring of 1992, I clung to the second verse of "Abide with Me," which says: "Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day. Earth joys grow dim; its glories pass away. Change and decay in all around I see. O thou who changest not, abide with me!" The promise of the sacrament prayer, that we may always have his spirit to be with us, is another promise of great power and consolation. Hymn 115, "Come Ye Disconsolate," acknowledges pain but also promises hope. Let me read the first verse: "Come ye

disconsolate, where'er ye languish; come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel. Here bring your wounded hearts; here tell your anguish." And then it promises and says, "Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot cure." These words breathe a spirit of comfort and consolation to me. I hope they do the same for you, that you can find others that speak the same strength from the Savior, the same never failing support and love. When times are hard for you and when you struggle with emotions you wish you didn't have, will you think of them again? Draw deeply from their strength. But there is healing in the gospel and in the unflinching love of our Father in Heaven. How do we rebuild our trust in the Lord and in other human beings when a human being has so seriously violated that trust? First accept that you will have very conflicting emotions. It is normal that you should. Psalm 55 seems to me to be something like a dialogue between the hurt and the injured self and the self that trusts in the Lord. Listen as I read it, adapted slightly to this situation; first the troubled and pained voice speaks: "Listen to my prayer, O God. Do not ignore my plea. Hear me and answer me. My thoughts trouble me, and I am distraught at the voice of the enemy, at the stares of the wicked, for they bring down suffering upon me." And now this seems to me to be the very antithesis of the Savior's reassuring promise when he said, "Let not your hearts be troubled." And in a situation of betrayal and violated trust, even our memories bring down suffering upon us, so the troubled voice continues and says, "My heart is in anguish within me. The terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me. Horror has overwhelmed me. I said, O that I had the wings of a dove. I would fly away and be at rest. I would flee away to my place of shelter." Then the sense of betrayal comes out sharply, and it says, "If an enemy were insulting me, I

could endure it. If a fool were raising himself against me, I could hide from him. But it is you, a person like myself, my companion, my close friend with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we watched with the throng at the house of God. This person attacks his friends and children; he violates his covenant. His words are more soothing than oil, yet they are drawn swords." Now as sisters and brothers we can understand this. Because of this betrayal comes rage, violent anger, even a desire for revenge. Now listen to the voice of the Psalmist as he prays in anger and despair: "Let death take my enemies by surprise. Let them go down alive to the grave. Bring down the wicked into the pit of corruption, bloodthirsty and deceitful men will not live out half their days." But then, ah, then comes the voice of promise and reassurances and says: "But I call to God and the Lord saves me. Evening, morning, and noon I cry out in distress and he hears my voice. He ransoms me unharmed from the battle waged against me, even though many oppose me. Cast thy burden on the Lord and he shall sustain thee. He shall never suffer the righteous to be moved. Thou, O God, I will trust in thee." Accept that ye will deal with much emotional turbulence, with anger and pain, with desire for revenge with a desire to flee away. Accept that the process of having the corruption drained away is a long and painful process. Trust in the Lord throughout that process. Second, find others whom you can trust. I think it is very important that you seek out your bishop or another priesthood leader when you feel you can and share this burden. It may be hard to talk to a man if a man was your abuser. Find a trusted woman leader to talk to and accompany you when you are ready to go to your priesthood leader. In material prepared with the support of the Brigham Young University's Women's Research Institute, I

quote, “Victims need to be believed. They need to be listened to. They need to be relieved of any inappropriate guilt about their role in the abuse. Many women reported the strength they felt as their bishops and therapists worked together. This arrangement allows bishops to concentrate on the spiritual and physical welfare of their ward members while the trained professional works with the victim to resolve emotional issues.” One of the women was so anxious and frightened about going to her bishop that she wouldn’t let him shut the door of his office during their first conversation. But when he heard her story, “he cried with me,” she said, “and that is when I started trusting him. He is the first man I ever remember trusting. I gave my therapist permission to talk with him to better understand how he could best help me.” And now another woman reported that her bishop was also initially baffled about how to help her, but he took the time to go out and get educated. He still keeps in touch with her even though she has moved to another state.

Third, do not try to rush or short circuit the forgiveness process, but continue to work towards it as you can. Wendy Ulrich, a psychologist in private practice, talks about the need to balance both justice and mercy during the process of coming to forgiveness. She writes, “The principle of justice requires an honest appraisal of our current systems and the realities of our pain. To forgive prematurely can close doors to the important realities that pain can open. Justice requires that we not assume responsibility for sins we have not committed, that we not assume power to control decisions we cannot control, and that we not exonerate others’ actions when they are dangerous and destructive. To attempt to be merciful in the absence of justice is to deny the characteristics which make God

God. The principle of mercy follows the principle of justice but cannot rob it. Mercy allows peace to come to the forgiver as he or she enlarges her understanding of all contributors, take action on his or her own behalf, and extends to others the mercy he or she would claim for himself or herself through the atonement of Christ. The forgiver leaves to God the sorting out of responsibility and intentions, acknowledging others’ circumstances and agency and accepting any and all good consequences that have come from his or her relationship, just as he or she has acknowledged the evil.”

Brothers and sisters, we still have our free agency no matter what other people do to us and even if we must work hard to regain parts of it that have been taken away. Our Heavenly Father’s spirit is constantly available to us. He sorrows with us and is with us in our pain when abuse occurs. He is there when we start to make the first steps back. His love is steadfast. We may feel betrayed by our family, our Church, our society, and even by God, but God does not betray us. His love is never changing. I want to read to you another psalm, and I want you to speak the words in your own mind to imagine that this is your psalm, spoken in gratitude and praise to the Lord: “The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer. In him will I trust. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my high tower and my refuge, my Savior, thou savest me from violence. When the ways of death compass me, the floods of the ungodly made me afraid. The sorrows of hell compass me about; the snares of death captured me. In my distress I called upon the Lord, and he did hear my voice out of his temple and my cry did enter into his ears. He drew me out of many waters. He delivered me from my strong enemy and from them that hated me. He delivered me because he delighteth in me. Thou art my lamp, O Lord. Thou hast

also given me the shield of thy salvation,
and thy gentleness hath made me great.
Thou hast girded me with strength to battle.
The Lord liveth, and blessed be my rock,
and exalted by the God of the rock of my
salvation.”

Perhaps these are not words that are in your heart yet. I pray that someday they may be, that the words of other scriptures sink deep into your heart. Hear his voice saying, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” He knows the burdens with which you struggle. He understands your heartbreak, your self-doubt, the anger, and the despair. Perhaps when he says, “Come unto me,” all you feel is paralysis. If you feel you cannot go to him, remember that he is already with us. Listen to his words from Hebrew 13: “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” So that we may boldly say, “The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what others shall do unto me.” Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever. Matthew records the Savior’s final words to his apostles: “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” In 2nd Kings, the Savior speaks gently to a sorrowing person: “I have heard thy prayer. I have seen thy tears; behold, I will heal thee. Go up unto the house of the Lord.” Now think of those words as if they were spoken to you, and listen to this promise of the end times as though it were your vision: “And I, John, heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold the tabernacle of God is among us, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither there shall be any more pain for the former things are passed away.” Believe that assurance. Believe the prophets who promise us, “And he inviteth them all to

come unto him and partake of his goodness, and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female.” What greater bondage can there be than being enchained by a sin from which you cannot even repent because it was not you who committed it? I implore you to turn to the Savior. I testify to you that when the scriptures tell us, “He descended below all things,” it means that he understands, knows, and accepts the pain of sexual abuse, as well as other kinds of innocent suffering. He is there with you in that suffering. I tell you that I love you. I pray daily for you, for your help and healing. For those of you who have been spared the scourge of abuse, I ask you to open the circles of your sisterhood and brotherhood. Include those whose trust has been betrayed by those who should have been their protectors. Open your hearts to them. Let them open their hearts to you. This is a burden that is grievous to be born. May we shoulder it together, not many adjust it upon the backs of those who have born it so long alone. May we love each other with a pure unselfish active love as the Savior has loved us. May our troubled hearts find the peace we seek with him, I pray, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.