

Elder Dennis B. Neuenschwander

Building eternal keepsakes

Brethren and sisters, every family has keepsakes. Families collect furniture, books, porcelain, and other valuable things, then pass them on to their posterity. Such beautiful keepsakes remind us of loved ones now gone and turn our minds to loved ones unborn. They form a bridge between family past and family future.

Every family has other, more valuable keepsakes. These include genealogies, family stories, historical accounts, and traditions. These eternal keepsakes also form a bridge between past and future and bind generations together in ways that no other keepsake can.

I would like to share a few thoughts about family history, bridges, and eternal keepsakes. Family history builds bridges between the generations of our families, builds bridges to activity in the Church, and builds bridges to the temple.

Family history bridges generations

First, family history builds bridges between the generations of our families. Bridges between generations are not built by accident. Each member of this Church has the personal responsibility to be an eternal architect of this bridge for his or her own family. At one of our family gatherings this past Christmas, I watched my father, who is 89 years old, and our oldest grandchild, Ashlin, who is four and a half. They enjoyed being together. This was a bittersweet moment of realization for me. Though Ashlin will retain pleasant but fleeting memories of my father, he will have no memory of my mother, who passed away before his birth. Not one of my children has any recollection of my grandparents. If I want my children and grandchildren to know those who still live in my memory, then I must build the bridge between

them. I alone am the link to the generations that stand on either side of me. It is my responsibility to knit their hearts together through love and respect, even though they may never have known each other personally. My grandchildren will have no knowledge of their family's history if I do nothing to preserve it for them. That which I do not in some way record will be lost at my death, and that which I do not pass on to my posterity, they will never have. The work of gathering and sharing eternal family keepsakes is a personal responsibility. It cannot be passed off or given to another.

A life that is not documented is a life that within a generation or two will largely be lost to memory. What a tragedy this can be in the history of a family. Knowledge of our ancestors shapes us and instills within us values that give direction and meaning to our lives. Some years ago I met the director of a Russian Orthodox monastery. He showed me volumes of his own extensive family research. He told me that one of the values, perhaps even the main value, of genealogy is the establishment of family tradition and the passing of these traditions on to younger generations. "Knowledge of these traditions and family history," he said, "welds generations together." Further, he told me: "If one knows he comes from honest ancestors, he is duty and honor bound to be honest. One cannot be dishonest without letting each member of his family down."¹

Start recording your history

If you are among the first to have embraced the gospel in your family, build bridges to your posterity by recording the events of your life and writing words of encouragement to them. In 1892 sisters of the Kolob Stake in Springville, Utah, wrote letters to their children and sealed them in a time capsule to be opened March 17, 1942, the centennial

anniversary of the Relief Society. After recording a brief genealogy of her family reaching back to those who first joined the Church, Mariah Catherine Boyer wrote the following to her two children: "Dear children, when you read this, parents and grandparents will be sleeping in the silent tomb. Those hands that toiled so hard in love for you will toil no more, and those eyes that gazed in love and approbation on your innocent brows will see you no more, until we meet in heaven. Dear children, . . . may the bands of a sister and a brother's love entwine your hearts. . . . Do right by your fellowmen, follow the dictates of your conscience, ask God to give you power to resist all temptations to do evil, and let it be said of you, 'that the world is better for you having lived in it.' Keep the commandments of God. May your paths in life be strewn with flowers, and may you at all times do right. May you never taste adversity. May the Spirit and blessings of God attend you at all times is the prayer of your mother. I will enclose the photographs of our family. Goodbye my dear children, until we meet."² These tender and beautiful words have now bridged six generations of a faithful family.

Importance of knowing your ancestors

Family history and temple work have a great power, which lies in their scriptural and divine promise that the hearts of the fathers will turn to the children and those of the children will turn to their fathers.³ Woodrow Wilson stated: "A nation which does not remember what it was yesterday, does not know what it is today, nor what it is trying to do. We are trying to do a futile thing if we do not know where we came from or what we have been about."⁴ Well might this be said of families also: A family "which does not remember what it was yesterday, does not know what it is today, nor what it is trying to do. We are trying to do a futile thing if we do not know

where we came from or what we have been about."

Family history strengthens all members

Second, family history builds bridges to activity in the Church. Family history work solidifies converts and strengthens all members of the Church. Family history research and the preparation of names for the temple can be most valuable in the retention of new members. Faith and confidence grow as family members are included in the saving ordinances of the gospel. During a recent stake conference, I met John and Carmen Day, who were recently baptized. They told me that they had already prepared family names and were planning to enter the temple as soon as they could. Is retention a question here? A new member of the Church can be introduced to family history and temple work very quickly by missionaries, friends, neighbors, and priesthood and auxiliary leaders. Participation in temple ordinances is, after all, at the center of our gospel experience. No official call is required to participate in family history and the accompanying gospel ordinances.

Recently I read an article in the *Improvement Era* of August 1940. I quote: "A year ago last April Conference, Dr. John A. Widtsoe of the Council of the Twelve asked the mission presidents of the Church what single phase of the Gospel was most responsible in their respective missions for making new friends, new interests, new converts. President Frank Evans of the Eastern States Mission looked into the subject and concluded that genealogy, and its attendant Gospel ordinances and beliefs, was the greatest factor in his mission."⁵

A major factor in activation, retention

A more recent Church study reveals that early involvement in finding and preparing family names for the temple and, where possible, participating in vicar-

ious baptisms for them are major factors in the retention of new members. The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve have encouraged a much broader use of family history and the Family History Centers™ in the retention of new converts and the activation of those who have fallen out of regular Church activity. Priesthood leaders, missionaries, and Family History Center directors all play important roles in the expanded use of these centers.

Family history work ties to temple work

Third, family history builds bridges to the temple. Family history work leads us to the temple. Family history and temple work are one work. The words *family history* should probably never be said without attaching the word *temple* to them. Family history research should be the primary source of names for temple ordinances, and temple ordinances are the primary reason for family history research. President Gordon B. Hinckley has said: "All of our vast family history endeavor is directed to temple work. There is no other purpose for it."⁶

Family history research provides the emotional bridge between the generations. Temple ordinances provide the priesthood bridge. Temple ordinances are the priesthood ratification of the connection that we have already established in our hearts. Mother Teresa said that "loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty."⁷ The thought that this poverty of loneliness—this being unwanted and separated from loved ones—

could extend beyond this life is truly sad. The promise of family history and temple work is eternal connection born of both love and priesthood ordinances.

Brethren and sisters, family history and temple work are the eternal family keepsakes that build bridges. They build bridges between the generations of our families, bridges to activity in the Church, and bridges to the temple. It is my desire that each of us will recognize the great keepsakes we have received from those who preceded us and our own personal responsibility to pass them on to future generations. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

NOTES

1. Dennis B. Neuenschwander, personal journal, 14 Aug. 1975.
2. Mariah Catherine Boyer, letter to her two children, Irena B. Mendenhall and Richard Lovell Mendenhall Jr.
3. See Malachi 4:5–6.
4. Quoted in *The Rebirth of America* (1986), 12.
5. *Improvement Era*, Aug. 1940, 495.
6. In Conference Report, Apr. 1998, 115–16; or *Ensign*, May 1998, 88.
7. Quoted in *Church News*, 20 June 1998, 2.

President Monson

Elder Cree-L Kofford of the Seventy has just spoken to us, followed by Elder Dennis B. Neuenschwander of the Seventy.

We shall now hear from Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

Elder M. Russell Ballard

Brothers and sisters, this has been an inspirational two days, and I hope that my remarks will also add to the instruction and the spirit of this general conference.

Joy of temple marriage

Occasionally I have the privilege of officiating in the temple when two worthy young people are married and sealed in