

Hearts Knit Together

By Elder Gary E. Stevenson
Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

As you extend yourself with kindness, care, and compassion, I promise that you will lift up arms that hang down and will heal hearts.

Introduction

Isn't it fascinating that significant scientific discoveries are sometimes inspired by events as simple as an apple falling from a tree?

Today, let me share a discovery that happened because of a sample group of rabbits.

In the 1970s, researchers set up an experiment to examine the effects of diet on heart health. Over several months, they fed a control group of rabbits a high-fat diet and monitored their blood pressure, heart rate, and cholesterol.

As expected, many of the rabbits showed a buildup of fatty deposits on the inside of their arteries. Yet this was not all! Researchers had discovered something that made little sense. Although all of the rabbits had a buildup, one group surprisingly had as much as 60 percent less than the others. It appeared as though they were looking at two different groups of rabbits.

To scientists, results like this can cause lost sleep. How could this be? The rabbits were all the same breed from New Zealand, from a virtually identical gene pool. They each received equal amounts of the same food.

What could this mean?

Did the results invalidate the study? Were there flaws in the experiment design?

The scientists struggled to understand this unexpected outcome!

Eventually, they turned their attention to the research staff. Was it possible that researchers had done something to influence the results? As they pursued this, they discovered that every rabbit with fewer fatty deposits had been under the care of one researcher. She fed the rabbits the same food as everyone else. But, as one scientist reported, "she was an unusually kind and caring individual." When she fed the rabbits, "she talked to them, cuddled and petted them. ... 'She couldn't help it. It's just how she was.'"¹

She did more than simply give the rabbits food. She gave them love!

At first glance, it seemed unlikely that this could be the reason for the dramatic difference, but the research team could see no other possibility.

So they repeated the experiment—this time tightly controlling for every other variable. When they analyzed the results, the same thing happened! The rabbits under the care of the loving researcher had significantly higher health outcomes.

The scientists published the results of this study in the prestigious journal *Science*.²

Years later the findings of this experiment still seem influential in the medical community. In recent years, Dr. Kelli Harding published a book titled *The Rabbit Effect* that takes its name from the experiment. Her conclusion: “Take a rabbit with an unhealthy lifestyle. Talk to it. Hold it. Give it affection. ... The relationship made a difference. ... Ultimately,” she concludes, “what affects our health in the most meaningful ways has as much to do with how we treat one another, how we live, and how we think about what it means to be human.”³

In a secular world, bridges connecting science with gospel truths sometimes seem few and far between. Yet as Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, Latter-day Saints, the results of this scientific study may seem more intuitive than astonishing. For me, this lays another brick in the foundation of kindness as a fundamental, healing gospel principle—one that can heal hearts emotionally, spiritually, and, as demonstrated here, even physically.

Hearts Knit Together

When asked, “Master, which is the great commandment?” the Savior replied to “love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,” followed by, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”⁴ The Savior’s response reinforces our heavenly duty. An ancient prophet commanded “that there should be no contention one with another, but that [we] should look forward ... , having [our] *hearts knit together* in unity and in love one towards another.”⁵ We are further taught that “power or influence ... ought to be maintained ... by gentleness and meekness, ... by kindness, ... without guile.”⁶

I believe this principle has a universal application to all Latter-day Saints: adults, youth, and children.

With that in mind, let me speak directly to you who are Primary-age children for a moment.

You already understand how important it is to be kind. The chorus of one of your Primary songs, “I’m Trying to Be like Jesus,” teaches:

Love one another as Jesus loves you.
Try to show kindness in all that you do.
Be gentle and loving in deed and in thought,
For these are the things Jesus taught.⁷

Even still, you may sometimes have a hard time. Here is a story that might help you about a Primary boy named Minchan Kim from South Korea. His family joined the Church about six years ago.

“One day at school, a few of my classmates were making fun of another student by calling him names. It looked like fun, so for a few weeks I joined in with them.

“Several weeks later, the boy told me even though he pretended he didn’t care, he was hurt by our words, and he cried every night. I almost cried when he told me. I felt very sorry and wanted to help him. The next day I went up to him and put my arm around his shoulder and apologized, saying, ‘I’m really sorry that I made fun of you.’ He nodded at my words, and his eyes filled up with tears.

“But the other kids were still making fun of him. Then I remembered what I learned in Primary class: choose the right. So I asked my classmates to stop. Most of them decided not to change, and they were mad at me. But one of the other boys said he was sorry, and the three of us became good friends.

“Even though a few people still made fun of him, he felt better because he had us.

“I chose the right by helping a friend in need.”⁸

Isn’t this a good example for you to try to become like Jesus?

Now, for young men and young women, as you grow older, making fun of others can evolve very dangerously. Anxiety, depression, and worse are often the companions of bullying. “While bullying is not a new concept, social media and technology have brought bullying to a new level. It becomes a more constant, ever-present threat—cyberbullying.”⁹

Clearly, the adversary is using this to hurt your generation. There is no place for this in your cyberspace, neighborhoods, schools, quorums, or classes. Please do all you can to make these places kinder and safer. If you passively observe or participate in any of this, I know of no better advice than that previously given by Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf:

“When it comes to hating, gossiping, ignoring, ridiculing, holding grudges, or wanting to cause harm, please apply the following:

“Stop it!”¹⁰

Did you hear that? Stop it! As you extend yourself with kindness, care, and compassion, even digitally, I promise that you will lift up arms that hang down and will heal hearts.

Having spoken to Primary children and youth, I now direct my remarks to adults of the Church. We have a primary responsibility to set a tone and be role models of kindness, inclusion, and civility—to teach Christlike behavior to the rising generation in what we say and how we act. It is especially important as we observe a marked societal shift toward division in politics, social class, and nearly every other man-made distinction.

President M. Russell Ballard has also taught that Latter-day Saints must be kind not only to each other but also to everyone around us. He observed: “Occasionally I hear of members offending those of other faiths by overlooking them and leaving them out. This can occur especially in communities where our members are the majority. I have heard about narrow-minded parents who tell children that they cannot play with a particular child in the neighborhood simply because his or her family does not belong to our Church. This kind of behavior is not in keeping with the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. I cannot comprehend why any member of our Church would allow these kinds of things to happen. ... I have never heard the members of this Church urged to be anything but loving, kind, tolerant, and benevolent to our friends and neighbors of other faiths.”¹¹

The Lord expects us to teach that inclusion is a positive means toward unity and that exclusion leads to division.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are dismayed when we hear of how children of God are mistreated based on their race. We have been heartbroken to hear of recent attacks on people who are Black, Asian, Latino, or of any other group. Prejudice, racial tension, or violence should never have any place in our neighborhoods, communities, or within the Church.

Let each of us, no matter our age, strive to be our best.

Love Your Enemy

As you strive to extend yourself in love, respect, and kindness, you will undoubtedly be hurt or negatively affected by the bad choices of others. What do we do then? We follow the Lord’s admonition to “love your enemies ... and pray for them which despitefully use you.”¹²

We do all we can to overcome the adversity that is placed in our path. We strive to endure to the end, all the time praying that the hand of the Lord will change our circumstances. We offer thanksgiving for those He places in our path to assist us.

I am moved by an example of this from our early Church history. During the winter of 1838, Joseph Smith and other Church leaders were detained in Liberty Jail when the Latter-day Saints were forcibly driven from their homes in the state of Missouri. The Saints were destitute, friendless, and suffering greatly from the cold and lack of resources. The residents of Quincy, Illinois, saw their desperate plight and reached out in compassion and friendship.

Wandle Mace, a resident of Quincy, later recalled when he first saw the Saints along the Mississippi River in makeshift tents: “Some had sheets stretched, to make a little shelter from the wind, ... the children were shivering around a fire which the wind blew about so it done them very little good. The poor Saints were suffering terribly.”¹³

Seeing the plight of the Saints, Quincy residents rallied together to provide aid, some even assisting in transporting their new friends across the river. Mace continued: “[They] donated liberally; the merchants vying with each other as to which could be the most liberal ... with ... pork, ... sugar, ... shoes and clothing, everything these poor outcasts so much needed.”¹⁴ Before long, the refugees outnumbered the Quincy residents, who opened their homes and shared their meager resources at great personal sacrifice.¹⁵

Many Saints survived the harsh winter only because of the compassion and generosity of the residents of Quincy. These earthly angels opened their hearts and homes, bringing lifesaving nourishment, warmth, and—perhaps most importantly—a hand of friendship to the suffering Saints. Although their stay in Quincy was relatively short, the Saints never forgot their debt of gratitude toward their beloved neighbors, and Quincy became known as the “city of refuge.”¹⁶

When adversity and affliction are brought upon us by critical, negative, even mean-spirited acts, we can choose to hope in Christ. This hope comes from His invitation and promise to “be of good cheer, for I will lead you along”¹⁷ and that He will consecrate your afflictions for your gain.¹⁸

The Good Shepherd

Let us conclude where we began: a compassionate caregiver, extending herself in kindness with a nurturing spirit, and an unexpected outcome—healing the hearts of animals over whom she had stewardship. Why? Because it was just how she was!

As we look through a gospel lens, we recognize that we too are under the watchcare of a compassionate caregiver, who extends Himself in kindness and a nurturing spirit. The Good Shepherd knows each one of us by name and has a personal interest in us.¹⁹ The Lord Jesus Christ Himself said: “I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep. ... And I [will] lay down my life for the sheep.”²⁰

On this holy Easter weekend, I find abiding peace in knowing that “the Lord is my shepherd”²¹ and that each of us is known by Him and under His kind watchcare. When we confront life’s wind and rainstorms, sickness and injuries, the Lord—our Shepherd, our Caregiver—will nourish us with love and kindness. He will heal our hearts and restore our souls.

Of this I testify—and of Jesus Christ as our Savior and our Redeemer—in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.