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REFLECTIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

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AN ESSAY

Each day as I enter the fieldhouse to jog at Brigham Young University, I pass through three sets of glass doors that act as mirrors. The first set always gives me a sense of well being and joy, because I look thin and trim. My spirits jump, and I wonder why I even make the effort to exercise because it seems I don't really need it. That feeling is short-lived however, because the next two sets of doors give me a completely different, but unfortunately more realistic, image. I'm always disheartened when I see what I realize must be the real me--wider and out of shape. After all, two out of three reflections can't be wrong. I'm not at all what I'd like to be, so quickly I return to my commitment to exercise.

As I've experienced this each day, I've seen a correlation to my life. In our associations with leaders, peers or with friends, teachers, family or other acquaintances, we tend to view ourselves by what these individuals reflect back to us, and this reflection is generally founded on how others treat us. They may return a smile or they may look away. They may be interested in our opinion, or they may be indifferent to our response. When another person returns an invigorating and wonderful reflection like the first set of doors, life goes better and we feel good about ourselves. When we are lifted up by our associations, life changes, outlook improves, and self-worth is enhanced. If, on the other hand, the reflection causes us to wonder about, to question or to doubt ourselves, this also changes life, outlook, and self-worth. A leader, peer, teacher, parent, neighbor, or friend becomes a reflector and greatly influences how we view ourselves. How important it is then, to reflect understanding, concern, and compassion, along with the fact that you really care. Through such action we may be able to motivate someone to greater accomplishment or, when necessary, to bring comfort to those in need.

As a teacher and practitioner in recreation, I have watched concerned, caring people attempt to provide direction, insight and assistance to individuals who are struggling with life. I have watched as a leader or a parent struggles with a child who demands freedom and vents nothing but bitterness and rage toward them.

It seems that life as we live it causes everyone to struggle. We all need help sometimes, but we're often unsure how to best assist those who are hurting, whether through their own actions or circumstances beyond their control. Likewise, some feel uncomfortable accepting help, or doubt the sincerity of those who would help. There is often a tendency to pull away from those who care most about us.

In my neighborhood in a twelve-month period, two young people took their lives, and a third walked away from family and friends. Even though many of us were aware that these young people were struggling, most of us made little effort to help. As a neighbor and friend of these families, could we have done something to prevent these tragedies? This question bothers me because I firmly believe that when we show love, understanding, compassion and personal concern to someone, we draw closer to them. We see their needs and wants with greater clarity and hopefully can promote the healing process.

Whether we realize it or not, our influence on another person is consequential. William George Jordan, in his essay entitled, "The Power of Personal Influences," notes that "Into the hands of every individual is given a marvelous power for good or for evil,--the silent, unconscious, unseen influence of his life." He continues: "There are men and women whose presence seems to radiate sunshine, cheer and optimism. You feel calmed and rested and restored in a moment to a new and stronger faith in humanity." By our sincere show of friendship, love, and concern, we give of ourselves to another. Jordan suggests that we can also negatively affect another person: "There are men who float down the stream of life like icebergs,--cold, reserved, unapproachable and self-contained. In their presence you involuntarily draw your wraps closer around you, as you wonder who left the door open." If we are to make a difference, we must cultivate and develop warmth, understanding and concern ourselves and demonstrate it in our actions and interactions.

When we are genuine in our concern, we will usually be successful in helping other people. It's amazing what a simple handshake, a phone call or a genuine "hello" can mean to someone who is struggling. Yet we should be careful not to overdo. While jogging around the indoor track at BYU, I watched with interest as a large-framed, athletic-type father ran his young son through wind sprints and stretching exercises, then threw him passes as he ran diagrammed pass routes. This was routine every morning at about 7 a.m. My initial reaction was "How great for a dad and son to get up early and share these special times. Here is a young man destined to greatness in sports." But, as I became more aware of what was happening, my perceptions changed. I stopped looking at the dad and concentrated on the son--a large young man who slowly and somewhat clumsily ran through drill after drill. I watched his expressions of pain, fear of failure and fatigue. It appeared that the boy was not enjoying the experience. He projected a sullen and sad countenance. At the same time I saw the father who loved his son and probably foresaw the time when his boy would be as successful in sports as he had been. The father was pursuing what he felt to be a worthwhile goal. He didn't yell at the boy. He was patient. It appeared that he really loved him. And the young man was doing the best he could. He was really trying, yet I could feel his frustration. I felt for the boy, and I wanted to tell the dad to ease off, to try harder to meet his boy's

needs and not so much his own. I didn't do either, but the experience taught me a valuable lesson.

I once read of a father who was estatic over the richness of his wheat crop. He took his ill son to see the crop so that he too could enjoy this success. In the process, the boy became lost in the field of wheat. In order to find his son, the father had to trample down the wheat, but it was clear what was important to this man (Sidney H. Alexander, Jr., "Today's Crisis," Vital Speeches, January 1, pp. 185-186, 1963).

In our effort to help others, we might also consider another principle. Each individual is ultimately responsible for his or her own actions. Others may do what they can to assist those who are struggling, but there will always be a limit to what can be done. Discouragement often comes to those who feel a complusion or need to solve whatever problem the individual is struggling with. This is a dilemma to most leaders, parents, and friends. An example would be the many personal addictions that plague our society, such as eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, pornography, etc. While much can be done, the eventual solution can only come from within the person who is struggling. True, we must never give up, but there is a limit to what we can do. When we have given a sincere and conscientious effort, we must be careful not to blame ourselves if our efforts fail.

In our efforts to help others, there is no guarantee of success regardless of how hard we try. We may come to realize that success is relative at times and difficult to measure. Whatever the outcome, we must believe that we can make a difference. The difference will come as we stay close and are supportive of those we are trying to help.

When we make the effort to help those in need, two things assuredly happen; others are helped because of our efforts, but equally important, we will feel better about ourselves and more comfortable with life.