

"Loving Lateral Leadership"



President John S. Tanner & Sister Susan W. Tanner
President and Wife of BYU–Hawaii
Devotional
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President & Sister Tanner: Aloha!!

President Tanner: We are grateful to be with you today. We have chosen to speak together at the pulpit because we hope this Devotional will be more like a conversation than a formal talk and that you will continue the conversation with your friends and teachers after the Devotional.

Sister Tanner: This format also fits the theme we have chosen, which is a quote about marriage that I first heard from Elder Robert D. Hales. It is an old Quaker proverb that describes the mutual supportive love between husband and wife. It goes like this: “Thee lift me, and I’ll lift thee, and we’ll ascend together!” I have loved it ever since I first heard it. It applies to my marriage with John, too. He is my best friend and is continually lifting me.

President Tanner: I hope that I have lifted you. I know that over the years, I have felt lifted by your love, Susan. I am a better man owing to you. “You raise me up, so I can stand on mountains . . . You raise me up to more than I can be.”

Today we are going to use the Quaker proverb “Thee lift me, and I lift thee, and we will ascend together” to talk about how we can and should lift each other as a university ‘ohana. Just as in a healthy marriage each partner helps the other be better, in a healthy university culture each member of the community helps us all be better.

Sister Tanner: Your influence on each other as peers is vital. At times, It can be even more powerful than the influence of parents, teachers, or administrators. I call the kind of role you can and do play “lateral leadership.” Today we will talk about side-by-side leadership, rather than top-down leadership.

President Tanner: I really like the phrase that Susan has coined, “lateral leadership.” We talk a lot about your becoming leaders. The University even includes “lead” in the three words it uses to capture its mission: “learn, lead, and build.” Too often becoming a leader is presented as something that will happen later in your lives, after you graduate and go out into the world. But you can and must be a leader now, especially with your peers.

Sister Tanner: In fact, just by you being here today, you are leading out by your example. Because you have made the choice to be here at this devotional, we feel that we are speaking to a group of potential lateral leaders who can be an influence for good on others who may be less committed.

President Tanner: Lateral leaders must stand on high ground if they are to lift others. They must walk the walk, and talk the talk. They must be examples.

Sister Tanner: They must also act out of love. Your righteous influence with others must be rooted in love – caring love for them and true love for God and His laws. Lifting, loving lateral leaders can help create the Zion university for which we are continually striving.

President Tanner: I have invited on the stand today students from the Honor Council. Would you please stand up? They are examples lateral leaders. They are trying to help create a culture here of high standards and love.

I have also invited Feki Po’uha, the manager of the Office of Honor, to sit on the stand. Would you stand up. I want you to see his kind and wise face—the face of the Office of Honor. We are all in this together with Feki, or ought to be—all of us committed to living with honor and helping others do so as well in loving, lifting ways.

Sister Tanner: Thank you Feki and you students from the Honor Council. You may sit down. Now we want to illustrate the principle of lateral leadership with some stories.

President Tanner: First let me illustrate the concept of lateral leadership with a true story I heard several years ago from an older admired colleague and former teacher at BYU, Todd Britsch:

Brother Britsch's friend Bob Despain spent several years at Cal Tech in California before transferring to BYU. Bob said this of his experience there: "Most of the students at Cal Tech lived in what they called "houses" (or dorms). The residents in the houses were distributed evenly between the classes or age groups. Very early in the fall the upper-class residents gathered the freshmen together to orient them to the university. A number of topics, important and trivial, were covered. The house president then addressed academic honesty. He said something like the following: 'You may have heard that you can be given probation or even be expelled if you are found cheating on your tests or homework, but I wouldn't worry about that.' At that moment, there were knowing snickers from the freshmen. Then the house president continued, 'Because if any of us find out about you cheating, we will make your life so miserable that you will gladly rush away from here.' Nothing more was said. Everyone understood that students at Cal Tech were not going to tolerate anyone cheating them out of honest test and assignment results." Bob concluded this story by saying, "I never observed dishonesty during my years there."

Sister Tanner: I am impressed in this story that the students knew their identity as a student body. They knew "who they were." In effect, they were saying, "We are group of students who do not cheat. We are not dishonest in our classwork. We want our incoming freshmen to know this, so they will become one with us in our pursuit of honor."

President Tanner: Yes. This is how a culture of honor is created and transmitted: student to student, side by side, through lateral leadership. A dysfunctional culture is created in the same way. If the upper-division students had communicated by word or deed that cheating was no big deal, it wouldn't matter much what teachers, administrators, or handbooks said about academic honesty. But because senior peer leaders spoke out for truthfulness, integrity, and honor, a culture of academic honesty was created on campus.

Sister Tanner: The term "peer leader" reminds me of a class a grandson was just chosen to be in called Peer Leadership. That title piqued my interest. Peer Leaders are expected to teach and exemplify good behaviors among their peers. They also make visits to 5th graders who will be entering middle school to teach them about the dangers of substance abuse and appropriate abstinence. The administration has found that these seniors have a magnetic appeal and special influence upon their peers as well as the younger students.

This grandson is also choosing to be a peer leader on his own with some of his buddies. He recently organized a weekly Book of Mormon reading class with some of his peers. He purposely reached out to several young men who did not have a good group of friends. By pulling them into this positive activity with other good youth he has literally changed their lives both socially and spiritually. The mothers of these boys have come to our daughter in appreciation that her son is doing something for their sons that they could not do for them.

President Tanner: In these cases at Cal Tech and our grandson's school, the lateral leaders were successful in influencing large groups of students in formal teaching settings. Now Susan and I will discuss a true story from each of our lives that involved lateral leadership with a single individual—a person we cared about but who was going in the wrong direction. In each case, we were alone facing a very difficult decision about whether and how to act; the situations were fraught with the possibility of offending the person we wanted to help. First Susan, will you tell about her lateral leadership with her brother; then I will discuss a situation with my missionary companion.

Sister Tanner: I have three brothers. We are close in age and in comradeship. When we were in high school together, one of my brothers lost a sense of his true identity for a season. He started hanging out with kids who weren't doing great things. I was very concerned about their influence in his life. I wanted to talk to him about it, but I didn't want to risk him pulling away from me and our good relationship. But he continued on with these buddies and I continued to worry. One night he was at a party where people were up to no good, and I was praying for him and about him. I wondered what I could do. As I prayed I had the distinct impression that I should go get him right then and talk to him. I was scared to follow that prompting, but I was also impelled by my love for him. When I pulled up to the house where the gathering was, I heard one of the guy's yell, "Hey Winder, your sister is here." I am sure that was embarrassing to my teenaged brother. But he came out and asked what I wanted. "I came to get you," I said. "Come for a ride with me." Fortunately, he came. I remember pouring out my love for him and sharing my knowledge of who he was as a Winder, and who he was as a child of God and the responsibility those identities carried with them. I said, "I want you to be true to who you really are." Finally, after a lengthy discussion (or more like a one-sided talk) I asked him if he wanted to come home with me now or if he wanted to go back to the party. He chose to come home with me. And in a sense, it was the beginning of him coming home to himself, his real self, his eternal noble spirit.

At that moment in time I was able to lift him. But over the years there have been many other times when he has been at my side to boost me through hard times. A few years ago, just before our mother died, he gave her a blessing that carried *me* through those difficult days of her decline, and the many moments of mourning. He has lifted me, and I have lifted him as we strive to ascend together.

President Tanner: It took a lot of courage for you to go get your brother. What impresses me as I listen to the story is that your action was motivated by your great love for your brother and by an impression from the Spirit. Probably that love and that prompting from the Holy Ghost are the only two things that could have gotten you in that car that night on that rescue mission.

Sister Tanner: You can identify with my challenge because you had a similarly difficult situation with one of your companions on your mission.

President Tanner: I did. My crisis in lateral leadership occurred as a young junior companion on my mission. I had a companion who fell in love with a Brazilian girl. He had found ways to see her by going to her house while on splits with a district leader. He ultimately told me about what was going on because we had developed a warm, mutually respectful relationship.

When he told me about his Brazilian girlfriend, I was devastated. I felt that my trust had been betrayed. But mainly I felt anxious about what to do now. I knew what I was supposed to do. Before my mission, my father counseled me that my first loyalty must be to the Lord, next to my mission president, and third to my companion. These priorities are now part of the little Missionary Handbook, which goes on to say:

“Be aware that you have a responsibility to protect your companion from physical and spiritual danger. If you do not fulfill this responsibility and your companion engages in serious misconduct, you may be subject to Church disciplinary action.”

My Dad had been a counselor in several mission presidencies. He had seen missionaries sent home because they colluded with a companion to cover up serious transgressions, such as fornication.

All this weighed heavily on me as I considered what to do—all that day and through the night. In the morning, I decided to have what people now call a “crucial conversation” with my comp.

I asked him if he really loved the girl. He did. I asked him if he wanted to marry her. He did. In the temple. Yes. In a way that could be celebrated by his parents and hers, both of whom were leaders in the Church. Yes, he said. Then don’t you think that we ought to go see the mission president and talk with him about this?

The question hung in the air for what seemed like an eternity to me. My companion was not close to the mission president. In fact, he had been a ringleader among a subculture of disobedient missionaries. But he was a better person at heart than he had been on his mission. That’s why I tried to appeal to his better angels. I think he wanted to change, though I didn’t know it at the time.

He did change. Miraculously, he agreed to go talk to the mission president and we immediately got on a bus and went straight to the mission office.

Sister Tanner: I’ll bet you were relieved!

President Tanner: I was! I don't know what I would have done if he had said "no." Would I have been courageous enough to talk to the president alone? I do know that this crucial conversation turned my comp's mission and life around. He did marry that girl in the temple. They raised a faithful family in the Church. They eventually moved back to Brazil for a season, where my companion served in a stake president and counselor in a mission presidency.

I consider this companion one of my most important converts. I lifted him. But he also lifted me as I looked for the good in him. I learned how to speak Portuguese from his near-native fluency in the language. I learned how to interact with and love people from his easy, friendly, loving ways. We ascended together. He finished his mission on a higher plane than ever before.

Sister Tanner: In each of our experiences, it would have been easier for us to sit back and not have these difficult "crucial" conversations. But love for our brothers and love for the Lord propelled us to action. "Thee lift me, and I'll lift thee, and we'll ascend together."

I wonder what would have happened to my brother and your companion if we had not been willing to reach out in love, as difficult as this was at the time?

President Tanner: That question reminds me of the story Pres. Dallin H. Oaks told in the most recent General Conference about the squirrel who was being stalked by an Irish setter. A group of students quietly watched the dog move in closer and closer until he pounced on the squirrel grabbing it in his mouth. Anyone could have warned the squirrel, but no one did. Yet the bystanders were horrified when the dog killed the squirrel.

Sister Tanner: President Oaks said, "As we see threats creeping up on persons or things we love, we have the choice of speaking or acting or remaining silent. . . Where the consequences are immediate and serious, we cannot afford to do nothing. We must sound appropriate warnings or support appropriate preventive efforts while there is still time." (DHO, April 2019, Gen. Conf.)

President Tanner: I agree with this in principle. Still it's hard in practice to know when to speak up and when not to intrude but let our examples speak for us. Nobody wants to come across as busybody, tattletale, or holier-than-thou judge. The scriptures talk about "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). To this day, I struggle with knowing how and when to do this. In my roles, an administrator and as a professor, I often have to evaluate performance. This requires me to be both honest and loving as I try to speak the truth in love. It requires balancing justice and mercy.

Or another way I sometimes think about this is in terms of harmonizing the 1st and 2nd Great Commandments. We all have a duty to love our neighbors and to love God. Loving others involves developing warm, positive horizontal relationships. Loving God means being true to our vertical relationship with Him and with principles of truth. We need to harmonize and prioritize these duties to love. If we attend only to the vertical we can come across as stiff, out of touch, and become a scold. If we attend only to the horizontal we can lose our moral bearings, going along to get along until everyone falls into a pit. The key for me is trying to love others as the Lord loves them, and loving Him first. Then we can speak and live the truth in love.

Sister Tanner: I think that the Lord's instructions in D&C 121 may teach us best how to speak the truth in love. It says, "No power or influence can or ought to be maintained. . . only by . . . persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, [by kindness] and by love unfeigned. . . Reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reprov'd lest he esteem thee to be his enemy." (D&C 121:41-43)

President Tanner: I agree. This revelation is key to exercising righteous lateral leadership and leadership in general. It is worth pausing on the words you quoted. Let's talk about some of the words.

First SHARPNESS. I think of this as the need for clarity rather than anger. Yes, Christ cleansed the temple with a whip, but more characteristically he lifted up the woman in adultery with compassion and forgiveness and quietly told her to sin no more. Yes, the Prophet, Joseph, rebuked the guards in his prison when provoked by their blasphemy and prompted by the Spirit, but the sharpness we are more normally called to exercise in everyday life is better illustrated by President Spencer W. Kimball when he lay prostrate on a hospital gurney. While wheeling President Kimball out of the operating room, a medical orderly stumbled, provoking him to curse and profane several names of God. Still weak from surgery, President Kimball nevertheless spoke sharp clarity but with love:

"Please! Please!" President Kimball implored, "That is my Lord whose names you revile." There was a deathly silence, then a subdued voice whispered, "I am sorry." ("President Kimball Speaks Out on Profanity," Ensign Feb. 1981). Now this is reprov'ing with a sharpness that penetrates right to the heart, but in love not anger. This is the example I like to remember when I think of the word "sharpness."

Sister Tanner: Let me talk about "betimes" and "when moved upon by the Holy Ghost." "Betimes" is an old-fashioned, archaic word. It literally means early. It is best to try to lift and help others before things get out of hand; to reach out to rescue and save before the squirrell is in the setter's mouth. Our former Edgemont Stake President often said, when we say something corrective early, it comes across as counsel; when we say it late, it comes across as criticism. I think this is very wise.

Knowing when to speak up is hard. For me one of the most important concepts is “when moved upon by the Holy Ghost.” The Spirit was key for me as I sought after my brother. Having the Holy Ghost means we have the direction and sanction of our Heavenly Father to lift his children. It also means that we will lift in an appropriate manner. In another section of the D&C there are additional insights about the role of the Holy Ghost as we lift others. It says “. . . speak the thoughts that I shall put into your hearts . . . that ye shall declare whatsoever thing ye declare in my name, in solemnity of heart, in the spirit of meekness, in all things. And I give unto you this promise that inasmuch as ye do this the Holy Ghost shall be shed forth in bearing record unto all things whatsoever ye shall say.” (D&C 100:5-8) There is an added blessing that the Holy Ghost will also witness to the other person that what we are saying is right and good and best for them.

President Tanner: In addition to acting under the influence of the Holy Ghost, we are given a list of qualities that we must have as we lift others. We must speak and act with kindness, persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, and without hypocrisy and without guile. This list implies that we walk the walk and that we have a relationship of pure love with those we want to influence. We don’t just come in swinging. We are not there to condemn or pass judgment. Our desire is to lift and bless. We are meek, we recognize that also we have our own flaws and faults. We all have beams in our own eyes too. We seek to persuade, not simply pontificate. And we are kind. My brother Mark ends every email he sends with this quote, “Be kind; everyone is fighting a hard battle.” I have long loved Paul’s counsel to Ephesians: “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.” (Eph. 4:32)

Sister Tanner: The key to effective lateral leadership and every other kind of Christ-like leadership, is “love unfeigned.” We must live and speak the truth in love, “love unfeigned.” Others must know our love for them and for the Lord is real, stronger than the cords of death. They must feel that we are about lifting, helping, not judging but loving. Sometimes this will mean simply trying to be a light. It will mean living the gospel and keeping our promises. Our examples will certainly be one of our best and most effective sermons.

President Tanner: In addition to the principles of lateral leadership in D&C 121, I would add one more before we close. It is found in both the New Testament and the Doctrine and Covenants. The Lord says that if someone offends us, we should talk about it privately with the person. This reduces defensiveness and increases the possibility of open conversation and change. “If he shall hear thee,” Jesus says, “thou has gained thy brother” (see Matt. 18:15 and D&C 42:88)

Now let us conclude by expressing our love and bearing our testimonies of what we have taught.

Sister Tanner's Testimony: Brothers and sisters, I want you to know how much we really do love you. You are in our thoughts and prayers always. Everywhere we go we tell people how wonderful you are. If we ever have a bad day we get ourselves out of the doldrums by remembering your stories of sacrifice and nobility. Our desire by giving this message is to help each of us be our true selves as sons and daughters of God, to help us obey the commandments and keep our covenants. We have promised to love our neighbor by mourning with him and comforting him. We have promised to show our love for God by standing as a witness of him at all times and in all things and in all places. I know that as we do these things we will lift one another and we will ascend together.

President Tanner's Testimony: I, too, want you to know that I love you. I fervently desire for this university to be a place where people love each other and love God. And it largely is. But sometimes I hear or see people that seem to flout the rules and violate their promises. Occasionally I hear of others who are less than kind in their efforts to correct. As a Zion university, we must strive to create a culture that upholds the highest standards in loving and lifting ways.

Brothers and Sisters: let us live together in unity and love—bound by our covenants and promises, motivated by pure love, lifting and helping each other progress along the covenant path as we strive to return to our Heavenly Father as His worthy sons and daughters. May we all practice the principle of “I lift thee, and thee lift me” so that we may all ascend together.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.