

## Dating versus Hanging Out

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On May 1, 2005, Elder Dallin H. Oaks spoke to young single adults at a Church Educational System fireside telecast from Oakland, California. Following is an excerpt from that address.

In his address at the BYU spring 2005 commencement exercise, Elder Earl C. Tingey of the Seventy referred to an article in a recent issue of *Time* magazine. It states that the years from 18 to 25 have become “a distinct and separate life stage, a strange, transitional never-never land between adolescence and adulthood in which people stall for a few extra years, [postponing] ... adult responsibility.” The article describes these transitional individuals as “permanent adolescents, ... twentysomething Peter Pans.”<sup>1</sup> Putting this analysis in terms more familiar to his audience of BYU graduates and their families, Elder Tingey spoke of “the indecision some college graduates have in ... accepting the responsibilities of marriage and family.”<sup>2</sup>

This tendency to postpone adult responsibilities, including marriage and family, is surely visible among our Latter-day Saint young adults. The average age at marriage has increased in the last few decades, and the number of children born to LDS married couples has decreased. It is timely to share some concerns about some current practices in the relationships of young LDS singles in North America.

Knowledgeable observers report that dating has nearly disappeared from college campuses and among young adults generally. It has been replaced by something called “hanging out.”<sup>3</sup> You young people apparently know what this is, but I will describe it for the benefit of those of us who are middle-aged or older and otherwise uninformed. Hanging out consists of numbers of young men and young women joining together in some group activity. It is very different from dating.

For the benefit of some of you who are not middle-aged or older, I also may need to describe what dating is. Unlike hanging out, dating is not a team sport. Dating is pairing off to experience the kind of one-on-one association and temporary commitment that can lead to marriage in some rare and treasured cases.

What has made dating an endangered species? I am not sure, but I can see some

contributing factors:

1. The cultural tides in our world run strongly against commitments in family relationships. For example, divorce has been made legally easy, and childbearing has become unpopular. These pressures against commitments obviously serve the devil's opposition to the Father's plan for His children. That plan relies on covenants or commitments kept. Whatever draws us away from commitments weakens our capacity to participate in the plan. Dating involves commitments, if only for a few hours. Hanging out requires no commitments, at least not for the men if the women provide the food and shelter.
2. The leveling effect of the women's movement has contributed to discourage dating. As women's options have increased and some women have become more aggressive, some men have become reluctant to take traditional male initiatives, such as asking for dates, lest they be thought to qualify for the dreaded label "male chauvinist."
3. Hanging out is glamorized on TV programs about singles.
4. The meaning and significance of a "date" has also changed in such a way as to price dating out of the market. I saw this trend beginning among our younger children. For whatever reason, high school boys felt they had to do something elaborate or bizarre to ask for a date, especially for an event like a prom, and girls felt they had to do likewise to accept. In addition, a date had to be something of an expensive production. I saw some of this on the BYU campus during the '70s. I remember seeing one couple having a dinner catered by friends on the median strip between lanes of traffic just south of the BYU football stadium.

All of this made dating more difficult. And the more elaborate and expensive the date, the fewer the dates. As dates become fewer and more elaborate, this seems to create an expectation that a date implies seriousness or continuing commitment. That expectation discourages dating even more. Gone is the clumsy and inexpensive phone call your parents and grandparents and I used to make. That call went something like this: "What're ya doin' tonight? How about a movie?" Or, "How about taking a walk downtown?" Cheap dates like that can be frequent and nonthreatening, since they don't seem to imply a continuing commitment.

Simple and more frequent dates allow both men and women to "shop around" in a way that allows extensive evaluation of the prospects. The old-fashioned date was a wonderful way to get acquainted with a member of the opposite sex. It encouraged conversation. It allowed you to see how you treat others and how you are treated in a one-on-one situation. It gave opportunities to learn how to initiate and sustain a mature relationship. None of that happens in hanging out.

My single brothers and sisters, follow the simple dating pattern and you don't need to do your looking through Internet chat rooms or dating services—two

alternatives that can be very dangerous or at least unnecessary or ineffective.

There is another possible contributing factor to the demise of dating and the prominence of the culture of hanging out. For many years the Church has counseled young people not to date before age 16. Perhaps some young adults, especially men, have carried that wise counsel to excess and determined not to date before 26 or maybe even 36.

Men, if you have returned from your mission and you are still following the boy-girl patterns you were counseled to follow when you were 15, it is time for you to grow up. Gather your courage and look for someone to pair off with. Start with a variety of dates with a variety of young women, and when that phase yields a good prospect, proceed to courtship. It's marriage time. That is what the Lord intends for His young adult sons and daughters. Men have the initiative, and you men should get on with it. If you don't know what a date is, perhaps this definition will help. I heard it from my 18-year-old granddaughter. A "date" must pass the test of three *p*'s: (1) planned ahead, (2) paid for, and (3) paired off.

Young women, resist too much hanging out, and encourage dates that are simple, inexpensive, and frequent. Don't make it easy for young men to hang out in a setting where you women provide the food. Don't subsidize freeloaders. An occasional group activity is OK, but when you see men who make hanging out their primary interaction with the opposite sex, I think you should lock the pantry and bolt the front door.

If you do this, you should also hang up a sign, "Will open for individual dates," or something like that. And, young women, please make it easier for these shy males to ask for a simple, inexpensive date. Part of making it easier is to avoid implying that a date is something very serious. If we are to persuade young men to ask for dates more frequently, we must establish a mutual expectation that to go on a date is not to imply a continuing commitment. Finally, young women, if you turn down a date, be kind. Otherwise you may crush a nervous and shy questioner and destroy him as a potential dater, and that could hurt some other sister.

My single young friends, we counsel you to channel your associations with the opposite sex into dating patterns that have the potential to mature into marriage, not hanging-out patterns that only have the prospect to mature into team sports like touch football. Marriage is not a group activity—at least, not until the children come along in goodly numbers.

Up to this point I have concentrated primarily on the responsibilities of single men. Now I have a few words for single women.

If you are just marking time waiting for a marriage prospect, stop waiting. You may never have the opportunity for a suitable marriage in this life, so stop waiting and start moving. Prepare yourself for life—even a single life—by education, experience, and planning. Don't wait for happiness to be thrust upon you. Seek it out in service and learning. Make a life for yourself. And trust in the Lord. Follow King

Benjamin's advice to call "on the name of the Lord daily, and [stand] steadfastly in the faith of that which is to come" (Mosiah 4:11).

Now, single sisters, I have an expert witness to invite to the stand at this time. It is my wife, Kristen, who, as an adult, was single for about 35 years before we married. I am asking her to come up and tell us what is in her heart.

**Sister Kristen Oaks:** Thank you, Elder Oaks. I was married in my middle 50s, and I feel like I'm becoming the poster girl for "old."

Before I start, I feel to tell you how much you are loved by your Heavenly Father. We are in Oakland, and I've just been to the visitors' center across the way with President Robert Bauman of the mission. We saw the *Christus* and the video *Special Witnesses of Christ*, and they went into my heart.

This is your time. Make it count by dedicating your time to your Heavenly Father.

I love what President Boyd K. Packer says about the Atonement. The Atonement is not something that happens at the end of our lives. It is something that happens every day of our lives. And so I say to our single sisters, make it count.

It can be very painful to be single for such a long time, especially in a church of families. I know how it feels. On my 50th birthday my brother-in-law was reading the newspaper. He said, "Hey, it says here in the paper that at age 50 your chances for getting killed by terrorists are better than your chances for getting married." I knew that dating was tough when he said that, but don't give up. It isn't a terrorist activity.

I would also say to you, be balanced. As a single woman, I had to go forward. I got a doctorate and became so involved in my profession that I forgot about being a good person. I would say to everyone in this room, always remember that your first calling is as a mother or as a father. Develop those domestic talents, talents of love and talents of service. As a single, I had to go searching for service projects, and now I have one every night across the table. I'm so thankful for that.

In closing, I think about the painful times in our lives. They will happen whether you are single or whether you are married. You may have a child who is very ill or experience the death of someone close to you or have a period of life that is very lonely. You may lose a child or have a situation you have no control over, such as a lingering disease. I would ask you to consecrate that to Heavenly Father. In Helaman 3:35 we read that if we yield our hearts unto God, all our actions serve to sanctify us, and so any time becomes a blessed time.

You are my favorite group in the world. You are most dear to me because I know what it feels like to be in your shoes. I was in them for a very long time.

I want you to know that this is the Church of the living God, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is His Church. I'm so thankful that we have a living prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley. And most of all, I know that we have a

Heavenly Father who loves us, as He was my best friend when there was no one else to love me. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

**Elder Dallin H. Oaks:** Thank you, Kristen. Now, brothers and sisters, if you are troubled about something we have just said, please listen very carefully to what I will say now. Perhaps you are a young man feeling pressured by what I have said about the need to start a pattern of dating that can lead to marriage, or you are a young woman troubled by what we have said about needing to get on with your life.

If you feel you are a special case, so that the strong counsel I have given doesn't apply to you, please don't write me a letter. Why would I make this request? I have learned that the kind of direct counsel I have given results in a large number of letters from members who feel they are an exception, and they want me to confirm that the things I have said just don't apply to them in their special circumstance.

I will explain why I can't offer much comfort in response to that kind of letter by telling you an experience I had with another person who was troubled by a general rule. I gave a talk in which I mentioned the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" (Ex. 20:13). Afterward a man came up to me in tears saying that what I had said showed there was no hope for him. "What do you mean?" I asked him.

He explained that he had been a machine gunner during the Korean War. During a frontal assault, his machine gun mowed down scores of enemy infantry. Their bodies were piled so high in front of his gun that he and his men had to push them away in order to maintain their field of fire. He had killed a hundred, he said, and now he must be going to hell because I had spoken of the Lord's commandment "Thou shalt not kill."

The explanation I gave that man is the same explanation I give to you if you feel you are an exception to what I have said. As a General Authority, I have the responsibility to preach general principles. When I do, I don't try to define all the exceptions. There *are* exceptions to some rules. For example, we believe the commandment is not violated by killing pursuant to a lawful order in an armed conflict. But don't ask me to give an opinion on your exception. I only teach the general rules. Whether an exception applies to you is your responsibility. You must work that out individually between you and the Lord.

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught this same thing in another way. When he was asked how he governed such a diverse group of Saints, he said, "I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves."<sup>4</sup> In what I have just said, I am simply teaching correct principles and inviting each one of you to act upon these principles by governing yourself.

Brothers and sisters, I pray that the things that have been said this evening will be carried into your hearts and understood by the power of the Holy Ghost with the same intent that they have been uttered, which is to bless your lives, to give comfort to the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable.

This is the Church of Jesus Christ. He suffered and He died in the terrible agonies of Gethsemane and Calvary in order to give us the assurance of immortality and the opportunity for eternal life. I pray that the Lord will bless each of us as we seek to keep the commandments of the Lord, to set our sights ever higher, and to accomplish in our day-to-day decisions what I've called the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime. This is the Church of Jesus Christ, restored in these latter days, with the power of the priesthood and the fulness of His gospel. Of that I bear witness.

#### Notes

1. Lev Grossman, "Grow Up? Not So Fast," *Time*, Jan. 24, 2005, 44, 42.
2. Brigham Young University commencement address, Apr. 21, 2005.
3. See Bruce A. Chadwick, "Hanging Out, Hooking Up, and Celestial Marriage," in *Brigham Young University 2002–2003 Speeches* (2003), 1–8.
4. Quoted in John Taylor, "The Organization of the Church," *Millennial Star*, Nov. 15, 1851, 339.