The atonement of Christ involved the suffering of an innocent individual for the sins of another in order that those sins might not have eternal consequences. In like fashion, we become saviors on Mount Zion when we are willing to suffer again as innocents the feelings of despair, pain, rejection, and anxiety inflicted during our childhood, but which we found too overwhelming at that time to integrate.

NOT FOR ADAM’S TRANSGRESSION: PATHS TO INTERGENERATIONAL PEACE

By Wendy L. Ulrich

As a psychologist, I have walked with many individuals in their search for greater peace in their lives and within their families. Stacy (all names and identifying information have been altered to protect confidentiality) struggled for years to understand the bad choices she had made at age fifteen, despite her testimony of the gospel. As she reflected on this time in her life, she realized that one of the causes was the lack of support and involvement she felt at home during the vulnerable years of adolescence. Her parents’ preoccupation with health problems and younger siblings left Stacy, the eldest child, feeling alone.

As an adult, Stacy took the opportunity to ask her parents about their own adolescent years. Her mother shared details of how painful it had been for her as an only child when her divorced mother, to whom she had been very close, remarried. She described her feelings of abandonment when her mother announced her wedding plans; her feelings of rejection as her place in her mother’s life was taken over by a relative stranger; her retreat to the more comforting world of social popularity with its incumbent temptations. Imagine Stacy’s feelings when she realized that these all-too-familiar feelings from her own life had occurred to her mother when she was also fifteen—something Stacy had not known.

Stacy then began to ask her father about his adolescence. Among other things, he recalled how painful it must have been for his father—to whom he had been very close—when he lost both of his parents in a car accident. Stacy’s father described his own father becoming extremely depressed, staying in his room alone when not at work. Her father did not mention his own feelings, but it was not difficult to imagine that he would similarly feel emotionally abandoned by his father, in addition to grief at the loss of his grandparents. No other event in his early life seemed to carry the same potential for traumatic effect. How old was her father when these events occurred? Fifteen.

Although Stacy realized that many factors influenced her early decisions, recognizing that her difficult year coincided with particularly painful events in the lives of her parents increased her compassion and decreased her blame for both her parents and herself. She examined the patterns of emotional withdrawal and psychological abandonment that had helped at least two generations of teenagers to feel rejected and alone. She determined to fight her own tendency to withdraw emotionally from her own oldest child, who was then approaching the fated age of fifteen.

Stacy’s parents were not evil for their unconscious repetition of a pattern from their own lives. Nevertheless, their behavior had negative, though unintended, consequences in their daughter’s life. Their transgression of the laws of love—transgressions of which they had also been innocent victims—damaged their child. Stacy’s exploration of these issues was not prompted by blame, but by a desire to understand all of the influences which had constrained her choices so that she might maximize her repentance and influence her own children more positively. To unveil in our own lives concealed ancestral patterns of transgression and its consequences is to experience the remarkable, freeing power of truth. Despite our reluctance as a people to grapple openly with the transgressions of our forebears, there is an important place in the gospel for candid examination of the impact of our parents’
transgressions in our lives—a place secured by doctrine and precedent.

BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD

JOSEPH SMITH stated that baptism for the dead constitutes the "most glorious of all subjects belonging to the everlasting gospel" (D&C 128:17)—a statement that strikes me as curious. Given the vast array of doctrines and practices of the gospel, including those unique to Mormonism, baptism for the dead does not come first to my mind as the "most glorious." Though Joseph's statement is not completely clear, his superlative suggests that this ordinance's significance extends beyond the obvious function of providing the opportunity for all to be baptized.

John A. Widtsoe once declared that if we are to be truly empowered by temple ordinances—of which baptism for the dead is fundamental—we must see "beyond the symbol, the mighty realities for which the symbol stands." I have concluded that temple work for the dead symbolizes "mighty realities" in addition to those symbolized by the corresponding ordinances for the living. The ordinance of baptism for the dead embodies a rich and instructive symbol of the process of making peace with our parents, and theirs, and beyond—the "welding link... between the fathers and the children" (D&C 128:18).

Baptism abundantly symbolizes the death and resurrection of Christ, and, through Christ, of all Adam's posterity. It further symbolizes the cleansing and purifying of the inner self and the rebirth of a new creature in Christ. All of these concepts are equivalently symbolized by the ordinance of baptism for the dead. But there is more.

In Joseph Smith's time, Saints performed baptisms only for their own dead ancestors and family members. Quoting Malachi, Joseph explicitly delineated the purpose of genealogical research and temple work for the dead as "turning the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers." Joseph further explained that "their salvation is necessary to our salvation, as Paul says concerning the fathers—that they without us cannot be made perfect—neither can we without our dead be made perfect" (D&C 128:15-18).

Powerful symbolism pervades the ordinance of baptism for one's kindred dead—symbolism beyond that inherent in the ordinance for the living. Specifically, baptism for the dead represents the critical, celestial process of repenting for, and forgiving, our ancestors' sins in our own lives. By participating in this ordinance for our own families or others we both make the Atonement available to them and personally accept the Atonement for our ancestors' sins which have been visited on us.

SPIRIT PRISONS

We partake of our ancestors' sins both as innocent victims of their transgressions and as perpetrators of their erroneous ways. This simple ordinance represents our willingness to have our kindred and our culture forgiven for those sins. It symbolizes our personal covenant to repent of their sins in our lives, preventing coming generations from receiving our sins. In short, baptism for the dead symbolizes the combined power of human repentance and Christ's atonement in breaking the intergenerational cycles of sin and transgression, perfecting both parent and child in the process.

As we participate in this ordinance, we symbolically release our forebearers from three kinds of spirit prisons: (1) the spirit prisons of our judgments and animosity toward them, even though we have suffered innocently because of their transgressions; (2) the spirit prisons of their own guilt and pain as they view with eternal perspective the negative results of their sins in our lives; and (3) the spiritual chains that prevent them from completing their efforts to repent because they can no longer influence nor make restitution for the unrighteousness in our lives that we learned from them. We symbolically allow them to complete the process of repentance by our recognition of their sins, our regret of them, our resolve not to allow them to be passed on to yet another generation, our lives of restitution and renewal. We become, in powerful ways, saviors on Mount Zion on behalf of dead forebearers who await our redeeming work.

To unveil in our own lives concealed ancestral patterns of transgression and its consequences is to experience the remarkable, freeing power of truth.
SINS OF THE PARENTS AND
THE ATONEMENT OF CHRIST

These celestial principals have been taught since Adam, according to the Pearl of Great Price. Enoch taught his people that Adam received angelic instruction to repent and be baptized in token of the atonement of Christ, through which "the sins of the parents cannot be answered upon the heads of the children" (Moses 6:54, emphasis added). The context of this scripture makes it clear that not only Adam's transgression but the sins of all parents as well are specifically included in the atonement of Christ. Although we suffer under the mortal consequences of the transgression of Adam and Eve and the sins of our parents, through the Atonement we are promised that those consequences will not be eternal. We may be punished for our own sins, but not for the tacit, ingrained habits and unconscious replications of our parents' transgressions.

Inevitably we are subject to the consequences of our parents' choices and to the wise and foolish patterns of living they teach us. Continuing with Moses 6:55, we are "conceived in sin" (the sinful context of our parents' lives), and as we grow "sin conceiveth in [our] hearts" as we learn the sinful patterns of previous generations. Just as we must endure the mortal consequences of Adam's transgression for our growth and development, the transgressions of our immediate forebears also provide an indispensable context in which to grow and learn—to "taste the bitter, that [we] may know how to prize the good."

Within the confines of this mortal training individuals experience a wide variety in the amount and kind of parental transgression they must work within. The transgressions of some parents may be limited to occasional impatience and normal inexperience. Others may learn more damaging habits at their parents' hands—abuse, negligence, dishonesty, and addiction. These great evils are part of the world of opposites we have come to earth to experience.

Other phases of our immortal journey (in the pre-mortal worlds) have provided us with ample experience with good, but with minimal experience with the stinging, bitter consequences of evil. Overall, mortality is constructed to make sure that we will experience sufficient evil to make informed choices, although, unfortunately, many of us will experience too little of good. In fact, there have been occasions when there is so much evil and so little goodness that children grow up without true choices about their behavior. When such is the case, wholesale destruction is ordained by God because the purposes of mortality are being thwarted. On the other extreme, in Enoch's society so little evil remained and good so dominated that the purposes of mortality were transcended and God translated the whole society to a different state (Moses 7:21).

Agency to choose good or evil will only increase as we gain the increased power and knowledge associated with exaltation. Even as we become gods, our God will not, and cannot, force us to use the power attained for good. Choice is always before us. We must learn by our own experience to choose good because we deeply understand and value it, and not simply because it is the godly "thing to do." This earthly realm is apparently the only one in which sufficient uncertainty permeates our existence to allow us to make our choices based on what we have truly learned to value, rather than on the reigning paradigm of whomever has the most power—even if that is God. Such values are forged in the fires of our own experience and observation of the consequences of good and evil in human life.

These values are apparently of such import that God conspicuously resists interfering with our choices while in this probation, even when they have remarkably painful consequences in the lives of innocent others. However, his plan ensures that the innocent can ultimately be freed from those consequences through the Atonement, and that our eternal fate will be determined by our own intentions and choices and not the unconsciously acquired transgressions of our parents, our ancestors, or our cultures.

Perhaps when we consider the repeated scriptural warning that the sins of the parents are visited on the heads of the children to "the third and fourth generation of them that hate me" (Exodus 20:5), it is not accidental that we are specifically enjoined to begin our genealogical research by completing work for the four generations immediately preceding us. Nor is it accidental that family history, not genealogy alone, is the recently reiterated goal of our research. Our assigned task does not consist in simply completing temple ordinances; we are to keep journals, write family histories, and pass such information on to our posterity. By so doing we begin to recognize the patterns in our lives that echo the sins and blessings of our parents' lives, that we humbly share credit for our moral successes, and awaken awareness of our learned predispositions for moral failure. Thus, even though the consequences of our parents' sins are visited upon us, we can be assured that the responsibility for them will not be. "The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin" (Deuteronomy 24:16).

JUSTICE AND MERCY

Just as baptism can occur as an initiation or a culmination of the process of being born again, so participation in ordinances of baptism for the dead does not presume that we have completed (or even begun) the process of making peace with our ancestors and repenting the sins learned from them. The "mighty realities" represented by baptism for the dead rightly "belongeth to my house" (D&C 124:30) because they are celestial principals of considerable magnitude.

Where our parents have been righteous and emotionally healthy, making peace with them may be a reasonably straightforward process. Where there have been more serious problems, releasing parents from spirit prisons of our own and their making can be strenuous and painful—a task not for neophytes in things of the Spirit. This "graduate course" in
intra- and inter-personal relations appropriately belongs to the spiritual university of the House of the Lord. Nevertheless, the command to repent goes to all, for all humans are "lost, because of the transgression of their parents" (2 Nephi 2: 21).

People who struggle with intergenerational conflict seem to follow a consistent path in identifying and resolving the sins of their ancestors. Two great milestones along this path can be identified as two vital characteristics of God and godhood: justice and mercy.

The principle of justice requires an honest appraisal of our current symptoms and the realities of our pain. It requires a gathering of evidence about the impact of parental actions on our lives. Sometimes the damaging consequences of parental transgression are fairly easy to identify and feel. At other times the transgressions are more subtle and difficult to define. Looking for repeated patterns of problems in our own lives and examining childhood memories assist us in identifying painful emotions that provide clues to the nature and extent of parental transgressions. To forgive prematurely can close the doors to the important realities that painful affect can open. It is by experiencing the painful consequences of the sins of others that we shape our own values and clarify our efforts not to repeat them.

Justice requires us to fully acknowledge a balanced perspective that mediates our own contributions to problems and the contributions of others. Justice further requires that we not assume responsibility for sins we have not committed, that we not assume power to control decisions we cannot control, and that we not exonerate others' actions when they are dangerous and destructive. To attempt to be merciful in the absence of justice is to deny the characteristics which make God God.

The principal of mercy follows the principal of justice, but cannot rob it. To forgive others in a merciful fashion is not to condone their sins or place a vote of approbation upon that which causes pain and dysfunction. To forgive is to trust in God's ultimate justice for wrongdoing, and to believe that he, also, condemns the sins that have caused us wrongful suffering.

Mercy further assists us in taking responsibility for our own lives, encouraging us away from the safe but powerless domains of blame or one-sided perspectives. Mercy allows peace to come to the forgiver as she enlarges her understanding of all contributors, takes action on her own behalf, and extends to others the mercy she would claim for herself through the atonement of Christ. The forgiver leaves to God the sorting out of responsibility and intentionality, acknowledging others' circumstances and agency, and accepting any and all good consequences that have come from his relationships, just as he has acknowledged the evil.

The milestones of justice and mercy mark a path to intergenerational peace that parallels the path of repentance in our own lives. Both paths include the steps from initial denial to confession, acknowledging the pain we cause, experiencing regret, learning to forgive ourselves, and renewing our covenants.

Baptism for the dead represents the critical, celestial process of repenting for, and forgiving, our ancestors sins in our own lives. By participating in this ordinance for our own families or others we both make the Atonement available to them, and personally accept the Atonement for our ancestors' sins which have been visited on us.

People sometimes recognize that problems they struggle with have roots in parental injunctions; however, many minimize or bury painful feelings in order to proceed with life. We may blame ourselves or our circumstances, citing the apparent success of siblings or acquaintances from similar backgrounds as evidence that the "true" problems lie not with our parents' sins, but with our own eternal nature. Increased awareness of painful consequences of our parents' choices, as expressed through anger, anxiety, depression, may feel to some like a betrayal of our parents.

A variety of defenses protect us from this increased awareness, or this betrayal of our parents. We may deflect the feelings in the numbing effects of activity, excitement, alcohol, or lethargy. We may bury unpleasant memories that have little
obvious relevance to the present. We may divert the pain into excessive and senseless anxiety or depression. Alternatively, our acknowledgement of pain may include excessive or one-sided blame, retaliation, or rejection, that also can serve to protect and blind us to the full and “just” reality of complicated familial relations.

For healing to begin we must understand that we repeat the patterns of the past when we do not see them. We relinquish our agency to ignorance and fear. The purposes of mortality are thwarted because we do not grow in our understanding of good and evil when we are unwilling to taste the bitter. We cease to be free agents, and, despite our best efforts, continue to pass to our children the negative paradigms under which we blindly operate. While many aspects of our lives may be undermined, the greatest negative effects occur within our families. Efforts to change our dysfunctional behavior are thwarted. Even if we change outward behavior, deeper thoughts and beliefs continue to subtly but powerfully influence our interactions. Buried feelings leak out in ways that appear mysterious, but are in fact quite predictable. Family therapists have long recognized that among the most powerful forces affecting family life are the conflicts and secrets that are never discussed. Acceptance of the reality of our parents’ choices is a first step in making peace.

For example, Sara, a young woman with three children, approached me for a consultation on how to handle her son, Scott, age eleven, and the oldest child. Scott’s behavior was creating considerable turmoil for his entire family. He was frequently abusive to his siblings, hitting them, threatening them, and yelling at them. His moods dictated the emotional tone of the home. Everyone walked on eggshells to placate Scott and ward off his temper outbursts.

“When you are angry with the kids, how do you express it?” I asked his mother. “What do you do with your anger?” She thought for a moment and then responded somewhat sheepishly, “I probably yell, and then I threaten him, and if that doesn’t work I guess I hit him.” She then acknowledged that she had not previously recognized a connection between her expression of anger and her son’s.

Exploring further, I asked, “Whom in the family does Scott most remind you of?” She said that Scott reminded her of her father, to whom she had been very close before his death ten years previously. The resemblance in her mind included both Scott’s tender, spiritual qualities, admired in her stake president father, and Scott’s temper. Although Sara had never before been the recipient of her father’s outbursts, she had seen him send her older brother flying into a wall on one occasion, had observed him hit another brother in the face, and had frequently heard angry comments that were belitling, cruel, and rejecting. Yet Sara became very uncomfortable when I labeled these behaviors abusive. “It really bothers me to hear you call my father abusive,” she stated. “He was a wonderful man with so many good qualities. I’ve given you the wrong impression.”

Despite Sara’s recognition of the many spiritual qualities of her father, her unwillingness to accept his sin of abusive anger is perpetuating a continuation of abusive patterns in her own family and in successive generations. Although Sara may believe she is not as “hot-tempered” as her father was, her distorted perceptions of her own and others’ anger colors her interpretations and responses in contexts arousing anger. The sins of her father are visited upon the heads of his children and grandchildren in part because they are not being confessed, but denied.

Acceptance and “confession” of the sins of our parents is no more a betrayal of our parents than is acceptance and confession of our own sins a betrayal of ourselves. In both cases, confession is simply the first step in the process of overcoming the sin. It is an act of maturity, love, and honoring of that desire which is most deeply held by all true parents: that their children will succeed where they have failed. It is not focusing on the mote that is in another’s eye while failing to regard the beam that is in our own; rather it is to fully acknowledge the beams in our own eyes, grown there in response to the motes of others that distorted their perceptions and influenced their vision of us.

Prophets remind us of the importance of understanding our historical roots when they emphasize reading the scriptures, studying history, and doing family history research. When I read the Old Testament I used to be confused by the favoritism, deceit, and dishonesty occasionally observed in the lives of the great prophets and their wives. I assumed that these faults were either being represented as virtues, or were being excused because of the status of the perpetrators. More recently I have come to the conclusion that these details are included so that we might learn from the failings of our righteous forefathers as well as from their spiritual triumphs. I find great comfort in the fact that these individuals are not represented as one-sided, faultless beings to whom I cannot relate. I am thrilled to discover that God speaks to, and ultimately accepts, such fallible kindred spirits. Just as reading the Old Testament forces the thoughtful reader to struggle with the sins and injustices of our spiritual forebears in ways that expand our understanding of the gospel, struggling with the sins of our personal forebears expands our understanding of ourselves and the values we will choose and will live by.

Even when we decide it is time to think about the past, this process is often hampered by poor recall of our early years. If our early life has been marked by trauma, or is very difficult to recall, a competent psychotherapist can provide needed support and facilitate insight. If our memories are fairly intact, it can be valuable to record our emotional life history in writing or by sharing it with a trusted friend in a recorded oral history. I have found it helpful to divide my life into chapters characterized by a predominate emotional theme or climate. I give each chapter a title, then describe a few personal experiences from that time period that seem to represent my struggles or experiences. Finally I let myself feel deeply the emotions that went with those experiences, and think about the conclusions I drew at that time about myself, my relationship to others, my abilities, my weaknesses, and my feelings.

A useful format for unveiling some of the forgotten feelings
The exercise of retasting the bitter and prizing the good involves confronting painful experiences from the past. It requires us to fully experience these feelings, to identify them, to correctly associate them with their original perpetrators, and to accept and learn from them. The purpose of tasting the bitter is not simply to have the experience. These bitter fruits help us learn the outcomes of evil so that we can draw valid conclusions about what we value and claim as good.

As I acknowledged to her that in playing her role I felt near tears with painful feelings of helplessness and despair, she was surprised, having assumed that her own feelings were unwarranted and inappropriate. As we tried the role-play again she was more willing to stay with her own role, rather than attempting to deflect and intellectualize. She began to identify the eternally fallacious but situationally warranted conclusions she had drawn about her own powerlessness and unlovability during such interchanges as she monitored the thoughts associated with the feelings.

We must re-experience our early emotions so that we can more fully comprehend the consequences of our parents' sins. The purpose of tasting the bitter is not simply to have the experience. These bitter fruits help us learn the outcomes of evil so that we can draw valid conclusions about what we value and claim as good.

John spent almost a year working through painful feelings of previously unattended ancestral sins. It is no wonder that we shrink from such a task and wish to avoid it. I believe the atonement of Christ included this kind of pain—a bitter cup from which even Christ wished he could shrink and not partake. Yet he partook “and finished” that cup (D&C 19:18), experiencing fully the soul-tearing, God-forsaken, and totally undeserved anguish of the innocent for the sins of all parents, in all ages of time. He invites us to share a taste of that experience with him as we repent for those who have gone before—repentance literally meaning "being in pain again."

Family therapists have long recognized that among the most powerful forces affecting family life are the conflicts and secrets that are never discussed. Acceptance of the reality of our parents' choices is a first step in making peace.

Once this is complete you may wish to switch chairs, and give the voice of the parent an opportunity to be heard. After both sides have had full expression, you assume a mediating role of an objective adult whose job is to fully support and confirm the feelings of the child and parent, negotiate a version of reality which meets the legitimate needs of the child, and consider the impact of what has been uncovered on the present and future.

RETAANDING THE BITTER—PRIZING THE GOOD

Makina peace with painful experiences from the past requires us to fully experience these feelings, to identify them, to correctly associate them with their original perpetrators, and to accept and learn from them. The atonement of Christ involved the suffering of an innocent individual for the sins of another in order that those sins might not have eternal consequences. In like fashion, we become saviors on Mount Zion when we are willing to suffer again as innocents the feelings of despair and rejection, and anxiety inflicted during our childhood, but which we found too overwhelming at that time to integrate. To do this we must emotionally "become as little children... submissive, meek, humble, patient... willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father" (Mosiah 3:18-19). We re-experience that pain against which we felt no choice but to psychologically defend when young.

Re-experiencing the pain plays an essential part in releasing ourselves, our parents, and our children from the spirit prisons of previously unattended ancestral sins.
He experienced enormous guilt for his “judgments” of his parents and his resentful feelings toward them. Re-experiencing the negative emotions helped him realize that his parents’ behavior had produced in him pain and misery that were tangible. As John contrasted these painful fruits with the warm, secure feelings he experienced from his grandfather and others, he could clearly identify that the attitudes and actions of his mother and stepfather resulted in evil. This did not mean, however, that his mother and stepfather were evil people. By seeing this contrast John could see himself as a free agent who could choose with confidence between the two courses of action exemplified by his parents on the one hand and his grandfather on the other.

As John re-experienced the negative early events, he realized that he hated his mother and stepfather, feelings he immediately condemned. These feelings caused him to feel extremely guilty and reinforced his self-perception of badness. He assumed these feelings represented reality. While role-playing this situation John reported to me what the critical voice in his own mind was telling him about himself:

John (critical parental voice speaking to John): You are overreacting to this entire situation. We are good people. You are entirely too sensitive to normal discipline.

Me (as John’s self-advocate): I am very sensitive about this situation, but that is because it has been very painful for me. What you did was not normal discipline—it was emotional and physical abuse.

John: What right do you have to judge us?

Me: I do not have any right to judge you, and I am not judging you. I have an obligation, however, to judge your behavior. That is the purpose of my mortal life—to learn from my own experience good from evil. I make judgments about whether an action is good and evil based on the long-term consequences. I judge your behavior to be evil because it has caused me lifelong pain, has caused my siblings pain, and has led us to conclude that we have interfered with our growth and spirituality. I judge these abusive behaviors to be bad.

John: You and your siblings just don’t have the internal fortitude to deal with a little discipline. It is not our fault, it is yours.

Me: We do lack internal fortitude. I believe this is because we were not treated with respect, patience, and kindness. I have evidence for this. When people do treat me with respect and kindness I can feel the difference in its impact on me.

John: How dare you judge us. I am an important man in the Church, and the name of your mother’s great-grandfather is in the Doctrine and Covenants.

Me: Christ said he could raise up from stones children of Abraham. A person’s name and lineage are not important to the Lord. “They are not children of Abraham who bear his name, but who do his works” (see John 8:39). The same is true today.

At this point John interrupted the interchange, tearful as he felt the truthfulness of this scripture. “This is right. This is the Lord’s way. I feel that the Lord makes the same judgment of my parents’ evil behavior as I do.” He realized that the Lord agreed with his assessment of their behavior, and did not require him to say that they were right and he was wrong in order to forgive them.

This stage generally takes many months, and even years, of hard work to achieve. When “forgiveness” is achieved around painful issues without a lengthy period of labor, the result is usually an abortion rather than a rebirth. Patient submission to the labor pain is necessary. Like labor, the pains of rebirth are not constant but intermittent, and they are often worst when the process nears completion.

Unlike labor, the pains of rebirth can be cut short by an unwillingness to endure them, with the individual rushing to an intellectual forgiveness of the parents that lacks integrity. Alternatively, the individual may retreat to the dull pain of past patterns, running from the intensity rather than working through it. When successful, the outcome is the death of the “natural man” who is fused with the sins of the parents and the birth of a new creature in the truth and integrity of Christ’s divine parentage and eternal perspective of us.

REGRET

REGRET is an important element in the repentance process, whether we repent of our own or inherited sins. When working through the pain of ancestral sin, we must deal with our grief, or regret, for all we have lost as a result of that sin. We must see clearly the ways the sin has contributed to our failures, robbed us of opportunities, or skewed our vision of reality. These losses are real, and grieving for them is an important step for many people. Often this grief is keenest when we begin to see more clearly our influence on our own children.

Ellen struggled for years to improve her tense relationship with her overly critical father. While she had come to understand many aspects of this relationship, and had no difficulty being aware of the negative impact of his criticism on her life, a dramatic experience of grief over the price she had paid for his criticism helped her see the relationship in a different direction.

Ellen’s boss was usually a caring individual, but he was something of a perfectionist and frequently pointed out minor shortcomings in her work, making Ellen feel very defensive. She recognized at one level that she was probably overreacting to this criticism, but this was not enough to defuse the alternating anger at him and devaluation of herself she experienced whenever she perceived unanticipated criticism. On one occasion when she was particularly vulnerable from other stress she began crying when her boss offered his suggestions on a report. Ellen was humiliated by her tears.

Ellen returned to her empty house, racked with frustration over her own excessive sensitivity to criticism, which she blamed on her father’s excessive disapproval. Having worked on this issue in therapy, she gave full vent to her feelings, sobbing at her absent parent for the crippling effect he had had on her self-esteem. She grieved for the opportunities she had
let slip away, panicked by the risk of failure. She grieved for the humiliated child inside who cried over a trivial correction. She grieved for the many times her fear of criticism had caused her to be critical of her own children out of fear of what others might think of her if they were imperfect. Feeling deeply her grief and expressing it fully were new experiences that helped Ellen accept her losses and let go of her resentment.

Although she never shared her experience with her father, it marked a turning point in their relationship. Having fully heard her own voice and felt her own grief, she became newly able to hear her father's unspoken self-criticism and underlying love. She could see things in the complex family relationship that she could not have seen before. The bitterness left. Over time Ellen acquired an appropriate assertiveness with her father that both curbed his criticism and buffered her self-esteem from his attacks. She also became more sensitive to the pain her children were experiencing at her hand, and became more successful at curbing her tendency to criticize them.

**MANAGING JUDGMENT**

Although Ellen acknowledged that her father's behavior was evil, having an honest and truthful perspective on this entire situation allowed her to separate his agency from her own. She recognized that she was not responsible for her father's bad choices and stopped personalizing his behavior.

She also recognized that perhaps her father was not entirely responsible for his behavior either, but that he too could have been victim of the unrighteous choices of others. She was able to judge his choices as evil without judging him. Judgment of him as a person she could gladly leave to the Lord. She felt confidence in the mercy, justice, and judgment of God, confident that no one's eternal life would be permanently altered because the choices of others, but only because of their own choices. Having experienced the loving acceptance of God in her own life, she was ready to forgive freely what had been in some ways her worst enemy—a loved member of her own household.

Although it is still difficult sometimes for Ellen to imagine that her father would care much about her perceptions or forgiveness, Ellen is confident that she is at a place of peace with him. She is able to pray for her "enemy" with real intent, and see more clearly other elements of family interactions.

As Ellen continued the process of working through her painful relationships, she was occasionally judgmental of herself. Repeating the negative parental messages she had received, she berated her lack of accomplishments and obedience. A simple question helped Ellen place her own inadequacies in perspective. Ellen asked herself what the world would be like if everyone in it were like her. At first she responded only with the inadequacies the world would experience, but then Ellen began to acknowledge that the world would be free of murder, war, drug abuse, theft, and jails. She began to weep as she acknowledged that the world would in fact be a rather nice place overall, and that some of these positive traits were also learned from her father. This simple question is very helpful in increasing the integrity of our judgments of self and others.

**COVENANT PEOPLE**

The final challenge for individuals working through intergenerational pain is to stop the cycle of sin from continuing in interactions with others.

Although Ellen acknowledged that her father's behavior was evil, having an honest and truthful perspective on this entire situation allowed her to separate his agency from her own. She recognized that she was not responsible for her father's bad choices and stopped personalizing his behavior.

She also recognized that perhaps her father was not entirely responsible for his behavior either, but that he too could have been victim of the unrighteous choices of others. She was able to judge his choices as evil without judging him. Judgment of him as a person she could gladly leave to the Lord. She felt confidence in the mercy, justice, and judgment of God, confident that no one's eternal life would be permanently altered because of the choices of other people, but only because of their own choices. Having experienced the loving acceptance of God in her own life, she was ready to forgive freely what had been in some ways her worst enemy—a loved member of her own household.

Although it is still difficult sometimes for Ellen to imagine that her father would care much about her perceptions or from continuing in interactions with others. Having come to our own conclusions about good and evil, and having experienced fully the consequences of both in life, we are in a position to more freely choose our course. This is not always simple, but the compulsive repetition of previous patterns, or the compulsive avoidance of some aspects of previous problems, has less hold.

Bev's extreme pain over her mother's adultery and divorce when Bev was an adolescent was close to the surface. The resulting rejection from her mother made her mother's behavior even easier to reject; however, it was difficult not to reject her mother as well. After Bev experienced the strong pull of temptation from a meeting with an old boyfriend during a stressful period in her own marriage, Bev was more forgiving of her mother's choices, and more determined to stop the cycles of sin begun by her adulterous grandmother. Although this increased tolerance helped Bev make peace with her mother, it also made her feel, although briefly, that the adultery
was not so bad. As Bev remained firmly in touch with her own pain as an adolescent, that pain helped her choose and live her values.

Although Bev's mother is dead, Bev felt it was time to release her from the spirit prisons of her own anger. She determined to complete the process of repentance for her mother, and to facilitate her release from the spirit prison of her inability to correct or influence those she had hurt and taught by her negative example. Bev wrote an extended letter to her mother over several weeks, recounting her experiences, her feelings, and her conclusions. As she wrote, she stopped to feel deeply whatever feelings began to emerge. Leaning into these feelings helped her work through them and feel heard—by herself. Although Bev is now more responsible for her own behavior, she is also much closer to fulfilling the purpose of her mortal life. She is taking the risk of choosing her own behavior, becoming an independent agent of her own growth.

"FOR OUR OWN SINS"

The statement that we are punished for our own sins and not for Adam's transgression is profound. It is also precise. We are, in fact, punished by our parents' sins. However, in the eternal perspective, thanks to the atonement of Christ "wherein the sins of the parents cannot be answered upon the heads of the children, for they are whole from the foundation of the world" (Moses 6:54), we are not subject to the lasting consequences of others' choices. We are not punished for these sins.

Likewise, this article of faith applies to our children. As parents we can be comforted in the knowledge that our children will not reap eternal consequences for our failures. Trusting in the justice of God, we can be assured that our children, too, will be judged for what they did with what they had to work with. As we teach them repentance and live exemplary lives of emotional integrity and courage, they will be better able to make the most of their mortal probation by learning from their own experience and furthering our common lineage. Although we do not wipe out sin in one generation, guilt we experience from our own parenting failures will not haunt them eternally, thanks to the atonement of Christ.

Baptism for the dead is a uniquely Mormon doctrine among modern Christian faiths. The great truths represented in this doctrine bear further testimony of the divine inspiration of the prophet who revealed and emphasized it. Joseph Smith is attributed with saying that a "correct idea of [God's] character, perfection, and attributes" is essential to our having faith in God. The principal of baptism for the dead also testifies of the consummate justice and mercy of those whose plan for our salvation we strive to follow, and whose good and healing characteristics we strive to emulate.

NOTES

7. N. B. Lundwall, comp., Lectures on Faith (Salt Lake City) lecture 3, point 4, 33.

COMMUNION

We come to each other empty, but not clean—like unrinised bottles, sides clouded with yesterday's film. We can't keep secrets except in diaries or photographs; our task is to refill and return.

"The reward," He says, "is work itself." There is no end to it, only the empty bottles cause us to return.

—WILLIAM POWLEY

THE WEDDING QUILT

For a wedding gift my grandmother gave to me a wondrous quilt, with a pattern of interlocking circles, with no beginning and no end, set on a field of white.

This morning, lying musing under my grandmother's quilt, I felt a thread tickling me. I pulled the thread, and it came out long and gray, no thread but a hair, still with the curl on the end, from a lady dead now for twenty years.

—D. CHENEY