
A Wonderful Adventure: Elaine Cannon

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Sister Elaine **Cannon**, General President of the Young Women, is a master of communication. A gifted author, editor, and speaker, she has a talent for sharing her heart with those who listen or read. The following article includes excerpts from Sister **Cannon**'s books, talks, and interviews. How better can we meet a master of communication than through her own words?

"Life is a wonderful adventure. Experience it deeply. Get involved. Record it in your journal. Live it all the way."

Sister Elaine **Cannon** knows how to follow her own advice. She has lived the kind of rich, full life she recommends to others, and she has recorded it in her journal.

In fact, her journal held prophetic echoes of the future. When she was 11 years old she wrote: "I'm writing this down so that when I'm a grown-up working with youth I will remember what it felt like to be young."

Understanding the feelings of others is among the finest of Sister **Cannon**'s many talents. She has a rare gift for recognizing and understanding the sorrows, concerns, and troubles of her fellow beings and providing the comfort they need. A multitude of people can testify that she gave them selfless and compassionate service when they needed it desperately, with no thought of recompense. She has taken many young people into her home and her heart to help them while they overcome crises in their lives. She has shown an uncanny ability to recognize the unexpressed concerns of those around her. Her present calling constantly demands this gift of love and insight.

"I love these girls so much. I really feel that I'm an agent of Christ in loving these young women. And they need it. They need approval. It's as if they're saying, 'I need someone to love me anyway—no matter how I look or what I'm doing or what I'm listening to.' I feel that if I can love them, then maybe they will believe that Heavenly Father and the Savior can love them. It moves them a step closer to that faith."

Sister **Cannon**'s greatest hope for the youth of the Church is that they will come to know their Savior. "You must come to know Christ. There just isn't anything so relevant. Some people say to me, 'What does anybody who lived 2,000 years ago have to say that could mean anything to me today?' and the answer is 'everything.' The gospel of Jesus Christ is always relevant. The answers are there. Christ's teachings really work. They work for every one of the concerns of youth today. Our challenge is to come to know what Christ is saying. I say to youth, 'You've got to find out for yourselves. Does Christ live? Is he the Son of God?' There is a plan that operates. God is at the helm. We cannot be happy unless we know this. It is sometimes the one thing that will keep a young man and young woman from making serious mistakes. They must love the Lord more strongly than they are drawn to each other.

"You can talk yourself out of anything, but if you've got real faith in the Lord, it will work when mother isn't there, when embarrassment doesn't apply anymore and conscience may have gone sort of dead. If you love the Lord, you'll say, 'I can't hurt him. He loves me. He cares.' This was a marvelous thing for the dejected little girl I held in my arms in New York recently. She said, 'nobody cares.' I helped her to understand that the Lord cares. And suddenly she could care about herself when she knew that the

Greatest of all cares.”

Sister **Cannon** is a busy executive, responsible for many thousands of young women and adult leaders. She is an officer in both the United States National and International Council of Women. She has traveled many thousands of miles in fulfilling these responsibilities.

As she travels about the Church visiting the young women, she tries to see the world from their point of view. “When I go to a country I ask them to take me where the youth are, where they hang out. How do they get to church from school or from their homes? Then I ask the leaders to take me that way. In one place in Germany they showed me the route the young people would have to take from their high school over to the ward for an activity. The only route they could take went right through the worst part of town—the part where all the pornography was. That short drive told me that we had to strengthen certain kinds of armor for those young people.”

Sister **Cannon**’s great love for youth stems partly from the rich and varied experiences of her own youth. Here, in her own words, are some of the events that shaped her young life.

“Our family home was on the foothill of a solitary mountain that was a moving force all of my young life. I could see it from my bedroom window and felt a certain security in its closeness. I had climbed its bald dome with my family, with Church groups, and with a gang of kids. Then one day—driven by desire to go to the mount, like Moses, to commune with God, to consider who I was and what I was going to do about it—I set out alone to climb that peak. I was 16, and this day my aloneness on that mountain was exhilarating. It was a most spectacular spring morning at sunrise when I made my way to the top.

“With fascination I sat looking down at the houses I knew so well and at their people beginning to stir with the sun. I watched the achingly familiar scenes as an extension of myself. I followed the paths of my life from home to a friend’s house, to the church on the corner and the school down the hill and to the neighborhood store. Finally, I let myself look upon our own house, the scene of my most tender times, my most important learnings. Almost in panic and with a wrench of my heart, I felt childhood slipping from my grasp.

“Everywhere I looked was someone who had touched my life. At 16 I was the sum of them—parents, school friends, storekeeper, Church leader. My heart flooded with a new awareness. Suddenly I realized I had some debts to pay. I vowed that I would try to be useful. I knew I needed the help of God, and when I turned to him, my soul filled with an awareness that he lives, that he cares even about a little person sitting on a mountain thinking she can make a difference in the world. When I came down off the mountain the world seemed beautiful, and I was glad to be alive.”

The vow she made that day is still part of her life. “My prayer,” she has said, “is that I may never be found wanting in the moment of someone’s need.”

It was on the hill that she also discovered the love for literature which has enriched her life ever since:

“One day in my early teens a remarkable boy gave me a copy of English poems with pages torn, worn, and soiled, but it changed my life. One verse was marked: ‘Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?’

“So wrote English poet Robert Browning decades before I read it that day and I took it personally, appropriate to my self-discovery, of hopeful idealism and firming philosophy.

“Worn leather volumes containing William Shakespeare, William Wordsworth, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Geoffrey Chaucer were passed into my hands by this boy who understood the grasp-and-reach theory. The public library provided me with ugly, stiff, practical new bindings of Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay ‘Friendship.’

“I loved all these books unabashedly.

“This boy and I couldn’t understand everything we read, but it was so exhilarating trying to understand that it was like coming in with the tide. Stretching our minds in the reading and then struggling to say it back in our own words to each other kept our relationship going one swift summer and was the basis for a lifelong friendship.”

As Sister **Cannon** grew in intellectual understanding, she also matured spiritually:

“It was late spring when I received my patriarchal blessing. The season was at its best, and I wanted to be too; so I prepared myself to receive what Heavenly Father would have to say to me personally. There had been some repenting, some fasting and praying, and deep discussions about the meaning of it all with my parents and with a very special boyfriend. I remember well the night before my appointment with Patriarch Jones. I felt a strong need to gather myself together with Heavenly Father, and I went and stood for a time listening to the song of the crickets. I felt very grown-up that moment. Then suddenly I felt once again the pull of the stars. Kind of self-consciously at first, I stretched down on my back on the prickly grass, as I had done so often as a child. Then once again I took a deep breath and turned my face skyward. I studied the heavens. And then there came to me the mind-stretching, soul-searching experience of feeling lifted up into the universe—almost into the presence of God, it seemed to me. It set my heart to pounding. I knew my prayers had reached home in heaven. The witness of the Spirit that God lives and was mindful of little me warmed me to tears.”

The influence of her parents during those growing and learning years is also a warm and cherished memory for Sister **Cannon**:

“My father was a loving man. He thought everything I did was marvelous. You can imagine what that does to build confidence in a young girl! There was love, love, love. He gave it to everyone, the stranger included. I became comfortable praying to my Heavenly Father very early because I felt my earthly father and my Heavenly Father must be very much alike.

“When daddy prayed, he always blessed everyone up and down the street by name. Often I couldn’t follow what he said because the formal words were unfamiliar and the style unlike our comfortable conversations.

“One night when he prayed, I risked the wrath of heaven and sneaked a look at daddy’s face. I was startled. He was weeping! The language he spoke was formal, but the tears running down his cheeks spoke volumes about the tenderness of his heart.

“My mother was very much involved in the Church. She was committed, dedicated, disciplined, and directed. Two words she used frequently were duty and obedience. She had a quick mind. She was well-read. She was always saying, ‘Let’s look it up in the dictionary,’ or ‘I’ll get the encyclopedia,’ or ‘Let’s see what the scriptures have to say about that.’

“Like most of us, I have had to pray to find out for myself if the teachings of the Church are true. The knowledge didn’t come just because my mother believed and made me obey. But because of her

teaching I have escaped many traumas. I was a fiery young girl, and my mother said I had to be a good girl. I am thankful to her because it was far better for me to be controlled then and become independent later than to have to overcome terrible sins and heartbreak.

“I think this combination of tenderness and commitment in our home was a very good thing. We see this in the life of the Savior. He did his duty, but at the same time he forgave with great tenderness. These two facets of life were blended together in the examples of my parents and provided a natural and meaningful learning experience for me.”

When the day came that Sister **Cannon** married, the love in her marriage seemed like a natural extension of the love in her childhood home:

“My mother prepared me to do what is right and let the consequence follow. My father gave me love. My husband, Jim, increased my confidence. He helped me become what I am. Isn't it lucky to have a man like that? He is a blessing to me. I may be a leader, but in our home he is in charge, and that's good.”

A gifted writer, Sister **Cannon** has often used the seasons in her books to symbolize life's changing fortunes. Of winter she has written: “Winter comes not by solstice, not even by the first snowfall. Winter comes when the heart breaks, regardless of the season. And often the heart breaks because of what we do to one another.”

One of young Elaine's early winters came on the baseball diamond:

“Nobody should be chosen last. Every time. When you are playing baseball and join a side simply because you are the last one left, it is no good. It's terrible. Humiliation. Rejection. Heartbreak. Winter.

“And that's what happened to me for one whole school year.

“Baseball was our life. Whenever the ground was somewhat dry during the year, we played baseball.

“Each time we played, the opening ceremony was repeated. We would choose up sides for teams. Out of all the regulars who raced to the playing field, I was always chosen last.

Instead of running away from the humiliating situation, as she was sorely tempted to do, Elaine stuck it out. She kept getting picked last, but she stuck it out anyway. Fortunately, baseball wasn't her only dream.

“My mother had taken me to an elocution teacher. Our family was very fortunate because my father had a good job and could afford to give us that kind of training. Then a wonderful opportunity came. Someone in the sixth grade was to be chosen to speak in the great Tabernacle on Temple Square for the school festival. I just knew it was going to be me.”

It wasn't. In her disappointment, Elaine had no way of knowing that one day her voice would not only be heard in the great Tabernacle on Temple Square, but would be broadcast from that very spot to the nations of the world. But without the advantage of knowing the future, how did she handle the present?

“Well, at first I thought, ‘What good does it do to work and train and prepare? People just choose their friends.’ But I got over that. I've always been a true believer in the Lord, so I could go to my Heavenly Father and say, Why? Didn't I work hard enough? What did I do wrong? She was learning at a young

age to pour out her heart as she would to a loving father and expect answers to come.

Through her school and college years, Sister **Cannon** came to realize that being distracted by the selfish aims of position, prestige, power, and popularity may gradually ease you away from what you really want ultimately; they will lead you away from that sometimes discouraging climb towards heights never dreamed of in the beginning.

“This is what I learned: When I simply did what was at hand for me to do and did it the very best I could every day, not worrying about other things, those very experiences that were important to my preparation for other opportunities came into my life naturally.”

She also learned that personal disappointment could be cured by service to others:

“I ran for president of my high school women’s student association and lost. I felt that losing left me out of everything, and I really wanted to be in. But instead of feeling sorry for myself, I worked with one of my teachers to plan a marvelous party for the girl who beat me.

“When you lose and you’re really hurt, you can just reach out. If someone offends you or gets the honor or the award or job that you wanted, you just say to someone, ‘What can I do for you?’ And then you try to reach out to another and away from your own hurt.”

Early in her life, Sister **Cannon** established her own measuring rod for determining her progress. Her overriding question was, and is, “How am I as a person becoming more like Christ?”

Sister **Cannon** knows well that life’s trials can’t be limited to losing elections and doing poorly on the baseball diamond. Sometimes there are blows so crushing that they seem impossible to bear. But heartaches and trials often reveal to a person the sure strength of his or her convictions.

“One of the most significant moments of my life came at my daughter-in-law’s funeral. I learned a lesson in faith from our son. He stood with his aching, empty arms reaching out to the coffin of his young wife and said, “This isn’t the way I thought it was going to be. But it’s all right because God’s principles suffice.”

The path upward from the valleys of such sorrows is not easy, but it is clear.

“He took the principles of the gospel and applied them. They work! They always do! That is the key to getting over whatever challenge or disappointment we meet in this life. If you do things the Lord’s way, whatever way it comes out is all right.

“The secret of getting through life is coming to know our Father in Heaven and his Son. If you don’t know the Lord and feel his power and influence, if you don’t feel the promptings of the Spirit, if you don’t know the Lord is your friend, then everything else is like building your house on sand. You don’t have a sure foundation.”

And how do you arrive at this sacred knowledge?

“You pray all of the time. I have profound respect for the Savior and our Heavenly Father and want to be close to them, but I have tried to train myself not to think they are on my level or put myself on theirs. When I get in a tight situation, there is a mental bending and bowing of my head as I seek God’s will, because I know how important it is to have his Spirit with me. I can honestly say that the worst

mistakes I make are when I go charging off on my own, or lean on the arm of flesh, or get to feeling confident in my own experience or wisdom. Fortunately, the Lord is very patient with us while we learn, isn't he?

"With the knowledge we have, we may mourn, but we need never despair. We have a little granddaughter in Seattle, Washington. There the daily rain keeps the sun and stars alike hidden much of the time, so she hasn't really seen stars. We think there are lessons to learn from them; they are brighter in winter's night, you know. I explained this to this little girl when we stood on a clear night looking into heaven. I smiled at her wonderment at first seeing stars crowd the nighttime.

" 'Are they there every time it gets dark, even if I don't see them?' she asked. I assured her they were, even behind the clouds.

" 'Then darkness isn't so bad, is it? If you know the stars are there.'

"It has application to life, doesn't it?"

Sister **Cannon**'s years of experience have made her a wise and compassionate counselor of youth. They listen to what she says because they know she knows their problems, and they know she cares.

"You can go, for a time, as a sweet innocent, fresh from baptism. You can cling to your parents with proper obedience, for a time. You can memorize the words of God and recite them at family gatherings or shine in seminary and Sunday School. You can fold your arms in prayer at church and feel virtuous inside. You might even marvel at the might of one like David when it is story-telling time. All is well, for a time.

"Then one day, life is upon you. You are out in the big world, thinking for yourself. The time for decision, for action, now can't be thrust back upon the prophet or the parent or anybody else. God won't interfere when you are being sorely tempted. Life is testing, you know.

David's first problem was only a giant. Your foe might be your best friend whose ideals aren't as high as yours. Soon we learn that good intentions aren't going to win the battle with self. The dilemma is shifting from depending on the arm and mind of others to self-accountability with one's hand in God's. This is what the battle is all about.

"You are a daughter of God, a member of his family. Being a member of a family usually means you do what the family does; you keep the family's standards; you live as the family lives; you speak as the family speaks. You love after the manner of the family. Your kindnesses are done in the name of the family. And while all of your dreams haven't come true yet and the growing pains are often grim, still it helps to remember that the head of this heavenly family is a patriarch who, with his great, caring, infinite wisdom and superb capacity to love, loves you! While you are away from him, wandering here on earth, experiencing and learning, he's watching. He's waiting. He wants you to make it. He wants you to come home again one day.

"No doubt you have had moments when you've felt a kind of inner longing, a loneliness even while surrounded by people. You've felt a kind of eternal homesickness—a vague remembrance that you do have some special link with Heavenly Father. Knowing who you are ought to make a difference in the things you do and the choices or decisions you make. When each of you begins developing a sweet and saving relationship with God, everything else will begin to fall into place.

“I’d like every youth in the Church to know that worldly accomplishments don’t matter one bit if you don’t have the Spirit of the Lord with you. My personal goal is to be more effective in recognizing when the Spirit is working upon me and when my own desires are getting in the way. That’s what makes all the difference. I am learning to give thanks immediately when I feel the sweetness of inspiration. I think that’s very important. I am coming to know personally the workings of the Spirit and have seen miracles happen.”

The personal standard of self-evaluation that Sister **Cannon** set years ago is the same one that guides her life today: “Am I as a person becoming more like Christ?” As a wife, a mother, a grandmother, and now General President of the Young Women of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Sister Elaine **Cannon** draws upon her experiences of the past to bring her best to the responsibilities at hand. She knows that there is yet an eternal future for which this moment in time will help prepare her. She continues to serve the Lord and his children each day of her life, hoping in turn to instill in the lives of all those within the circle of her influence the desire to seek first the kingdom of God, knowing that in the Lord’s due time all else will be added.

Gospel topics: dedication, love, service, Young Women

[photo] Photograph by Eldon Linschoten

[photo] With her mother, Winnifred Anderson.

[photo] With President Spencer W. Kimball.

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◀ Previous | Next ▶