

**Senator Harry Reid**

BYU Forum  
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FAITH, FAMILY, AND PUBLIC SERVICE

A few weeks ago, my oldest granddaughter Ryan wrote me this letter:

Dear Grammy and Poppy,

I am currently working on a value project for personal progress in young women's. I've completed all of my projects except faith and so I decided to ask close family members to write about an experience that helped shape their testimony about faith. It would be great if you could help me out! You can either write a letter back or email it to me. Have a great day!

Love you guys, Ryan Reid.

I would like to read to you what I wrote back to her:

Dear Ryan,

From the time I was a little boy I wondered, 'why does the sun stay hot?' 'Why doesn't it cool each day, each year?' I remember my father pointing in the starry Searchlight sky to the beautiful Milky Way. In my young mind I marveled at this spectacle. But I thought how many hundreds of stars made up the Milky Way.

Ryan, I even remember the first time you looked into the Searchlight sky and saw, not the Milky Way, but stars. Oh, did you stare with wonder.

I have since learned the Milky Way has not hundreds of stars in it, but rather, about 300 billion stars. I have additionally understood there are about 100 billion other galaxies in our universe, beyond our view. We could fly to the Moon by today's ordinary jet speed in 20 days, but to the Sun it would take 21 years.

So, when as a young man I was taught the Gospel, I was convinced of God and soon developed a

testimony of Jesus Christ. It was through an understanding of the Plan of Salvation that I understood there was more to life than just me.

As Paul taught in the New Testament, “Now faith is the substance and or assurance of things hoped for, the evidence or demonstration of things not seen.”

"Mortals must live by faith.”

I have knowledge of God’s existence and an understanding of His character. I believe faith can be nurtured, faith can be renewed by living the Golden Rule, study, including scriptures and constant prayer. As I proceed in life I agree with the old Jewish belief that in the struggle with evil, only faith matters.

My outlook on life – my faith is best summarized by an inscription found in a Cologne, Germany, cellar, where Jews hid from the Nazis which read, “I believe in the sun even when it is not shining. I believe in love even when not feeling it. I believe in God even when He is silent.”

Thus, I have a testimony of God, his Son Jesus and the restored Gospel, now led by the Prophet Gordon B. Hinckley.”

Love, Poppy.

Today I am going to discuss with you my journey from Searchlight, Nevada, the place of my birth, to my present job as Majority Leader of the United States Senate.

My path has not been a straight line. Searchlight is about 500 miles from Salt Lake in the southern tip of Nevada and about 60 miles from Las Vegas. Searchlight, founded in 1898 because of the discovery of rich gold ore, soon became the most populous city in Southern Nevada – even larger than Las Vegas. But by the time I was growing up in Searchlight, it was well past its prime and was home to only about 200 people.

My three brothers and I grew up in a home with no inside toilet or hot water. Our little house was heated by a wood-burning stove. My father was a hard rock miner – however, work in the mines was hard to find. Very sporadic. And when he did find employment, often he was paid late and often with checks that bounced. My mother also worked extremely hard – by taking in wash. In a town of a couple hundred –

whose wash could she do?

The mines were virtually gone, but prostitution flourished. At one time, Searchlight had 13 brothels. The question whose wash...has this as an answer.

Elementary school was, for me, a two room school. One room for grades 1-4. The other room for grades 5-8. I looked forward with youthful exuberance to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, in a room with the big kids. Two teachers – one for each room. But by the time I graduated the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, there were not enough students for two teachers, so I never made it into the other room with the big kids.

When 8<sup>th</sup> grade rolled around, Searchlight Elementary only had six 8<sup>th</sup> graders – six graduates. But I hope you feel good about me – because I graduated in the top third of my class.

Searchlight had not a single Church. Not a Church service, no services...as I was growing up. It took me many, many years to understand the greatness of our country – my parents were poor, they drank too much. They were uneducated. My father never graduated from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, my mother never finished high school.

But I learned in America, it doesn't matter the education of your parents, their religion, we had none, their social status, their color, their economic status. I am an example of this. If I made it, anyone can.

Now, back to my journey.

After Searchlight's 8<sup>th</sup> grade, there was no high school, no bussing, not everyone went to high school. Many who started, didn't finish. I chose Henderson, Nevada, 50 miles from Searchlight. I boarded with people during the school year and came home on many weekends. My necessary mode of transportation was most often hitchhiking.

The first family my parents found for me to board with was my Uncle Joe and Aunt Ray. Uncle Joe was one of my Dad's brothers. Aunt Ray was the family oddity, she was a Mormon. She didn't fit into the usual Searchlight crowd. They were good to me, but quite strict.

My first exposure to members of the LDS Church came during my first few weeks of high school. I especially remember two boys – Ron McAllister and Bernard Cannon. They were everything I wasn't.

My mother ordered my clothes out of the Sears catalog. So when I started high school, my hair and my clothes were quite different than most everyone else.

Bernie, big and very popular and a star athlete, was the son of a Bishop. For reasons I still don't comprehend, he was so very good to me and made me feel that I was not the hick that some thought.

Ron asked me to attend something he called seminary. He said don't worry about the religious part of the deal.

Remember, I had never been to any Church, ever.

His main selling point was that there were many cute girls who attended this early morning program before school. He was right. The girls were nice and very attractive, but my attention instantly focused on the seminary teacher, Marlan Walker. He was a gifted teacher.

The subject that year was Church history. He taught with authority in a sensitive, spiritual way. It was here for the first time I learned of a man named Jesus. Mr. Walker was, I learned, not only the seminary teacher, but the Bishop of the only LDS ward in Henderson. He also taught Spanish at Basic High School.

The most important election in my life has been when I was a sophomore in high school. I ran and was elected junior class treasurer. I felt I had been accepted by my peers.

My junior year I saw this five foot, black haired, dark brown eyed girl named Landra. She was a sophomore. Because of my nonreligious background, I did not understand the complications of falling in love with someone of the Jewish faith.

Things were good. I was elected student body president and received an athletic scholarship to go to Southern Utah State. I soon, after getting hurt, realized I would never be the athlete of my dreams. I wasn't fast enough, big enough and frankly not good enough. I did though for the first time come to realize that I could make good grades...and I did. I got an academic scholarship to Utah State University.

Landra's parents were good to me, until they found out we were in love, real soul mates. So trouble, serious interference ensued. Between my 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> years of college – the year of my going to Logan, we decided we had no alternative but to elope. My wonderful 'wife -to- be' decided we both couldn't go to

college – so she didn't then return to the University of Nevada. She sacrificed her education for mine, and it was many years before she was able to go back to school.

We planned our elopement. Marlan Walker had even reached out to Landra and gave her a few “off the cuff” missionary lessons. So when he was informed by Ron McAllister that we were going to a Las Vegas Justice of the Peace to be married, he said, “I'll save them the \$25 and I will marry them.” And marry us he did. Me, a nothing and Landra a Jew.

On a quiet Saturday night, he opened the only LDS Church in Henderson and gave us the real deal. Interviews before the ceremony – and some real counseling. And because we were all worried that Landra's father might interrupt the marriage ceremony, my dear friend 6 foot 6 Ron Mich'l guarded the door. With a few friends present, we were married by Bishop J. Marlan Walker, our inspiration and forever friend.

Landra and Harry, two 19 year olds with nothing but each other, headed for an adventure in far-away Logan.

That night, soon after we were married, Landra called her parents. Her very religious father told her what she already knew. Jewish tradition holds, that if you marry out of the faith, in effect, a funeral is held for the one who married a non-Jew. But Earl Gould, born in Russia under the name of Israel Goldfarb, said... you are our only child. We did all we could to separate the two of you and failed. He said, “We choose not to follow this rule of abandoning you. You are our only child and we will now do everything in our power to make you happy.”

So, two lovesick 19 year olds left on their life's adventure to far away Utah State University.

Housing in Logan was difficult. We arrived and went to the local newspaper to look for places to live for our years at USU. An ad that was going to run in the next day's paper was shown to us. In the newspaper, we found a basement apartment at 303 South 1<sup>st</sup> West. Matthew Bird, the owner, was called. The first question he asked was, are you LDS? We said no, he said come to my house and let's talk. We passed the test. He rented their basement to us. Matthew Bird, an old man, had been on 3 missions for the Church.

To us the Birds seemed nice and we found our dark little apartment...our first home, very sparse, but adequate. The Birds were of modest means. Mr. Bird had a huge garden that he worked hard. One

evening I ran up the stairs to borrow an item for dinner. What a strange scene I saw through the window, the whole family, mother, father and children, kneeling in prayer around the table. I had never seen a setting quite like this.

Landra worked long hours each weekday, arising each morning very early to take a bus ride from Logan to her place of employment, at the Thiokol Chemical Company near Brigham City. Landra learned some months later that the driver of the bus, a man named Mr. McPherson, was a stake missionary. He asked Landra if she would ask me if we would take missionary lessons. We did and Mr. McPherson and a young elder in shirtsleeves, in the frigid winter of Northern Utah, would climb down our very icy steps on crutches because of his being a paraplegic.

They taught us the gospel for many months. However, with the background of our LDS friends we had met, Marlan Walker, the Birds and the missionary driven spirit, Landra and I accepted the challenge to be baptized.

The Church has been a blessing to us and our five children. All have attended BYU. One, because of his athletic prowess graduated from the University of Virginia and only attended his last semester of college at BYU. That was because his girlfriend and future wife was a student there at the Y.

I have vicariously lived my boys' missions to Argentina, Ecuador and Spain and feel blessed to have been able to witness our children's marriages at the Salt Lake, San Diego, St. George, Oakland and Mesa Temples.

We have now 16 grandchildren. Let me though tell you only about our newest.

We were excited when Josh, who married somewhat later than the others children, announced that Tamsen, his wife, was pregnant with their second child. All went well, the baby boy was born.

Several days went by and we waited and wondered and of course we were curious about the name of the newborn. We felt it ok to wonder, as we have grandchildren named Savannah, Aiden, Mattie, River and Piper – some would say unusual names.

Finally, Josh called and said Dad, we have decided we are going to name the baby Harry. Wow! Another Harry Reid. I was really happy. It surprised me. I felt so emotional.

But as soon as I hung up the phone, I called my other four children and announced that I was disowning each of them. They had fifteen chances between them to name their babies after me. One even had the lame excuse that – Dad, but we had all girls. I said, you could have named one of them Harriet!

Let's talk politics.

It is not uncommon for members of the Church to ask how I can be a Mormon and a Democrat. Some say my party affiliation puts me in the minority of our Church members. But my answer is that if you look at the Church membership over the years, Democrats have not always been the minority, and I believe we won't be for long.

I also say that my faith and political beliefs are deeply intertwined. I am a Democrat because I am a Mormon, not in spite of it.

Growing up in Searchlight, my mother always had on our wall a small pillow case – royal blue with gold fringe, with the words, “We can, we will, we must.” And the name on the bottom in large gold letters – Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

President Roosevelt was the closest we had to a worshipful figure as I grew up. For my economically challenged parents, even though a man of great wealth and privilege, Roosevelt represented them. He fought for the workers of America. President Roosevelt is the basis of my political direction.

Social security is the most successful social program in the history of the world. A government program that helps the old, the handicapped, widows and orphans. The Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps programs that put hundreds of thousands of unemployed people to work. Not handouts, but jobs.

Roosevelt tackled our greatest economic crisis with the 3 R's: relief, recovery and reform. And let's not forget -- he was commander-in-chief of the greatest military ever assembled at a time of great crisis in the world.

As we learned in the man-made tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, during a crisis people have only 3 places to look for help... family, government and God. I say government can be our friend. Some say it is never

our friend.

I say working people are the cornerstone of our economy. Some say that if you help the wealthy, they will create jobs and it will trickle down and help all.

I say unions are responsible for the forty hour work week, decent wages and safe working conditions. Some say unions are unnecessary, that employers in an open market will take good care of their employees.

I say global warming is here and is an environmental emergency. Some say it is only nature's cycle and our free enterprise system will deal with it.

I say our country using 21 million barrels' of oil each day and millions of tons of coal must stop. Some say it is too costly to switch to solar, wind and geothermal energy.

I say the invasion of Iraq was the worst foreign policy blunder in our country's history. Some say this war of choice was our only reasonable alternative.

I say our diplomatic army should be stronger than our military army. Some say the war on terror must be won militarily.

On the topic of abortion, let me say I am pro-life and for the 25 years I have been in Congress have always been pro-life. Some say Democrats can't be pro-life, but I am proof that we can. During my first year in the Senate, there was an abortion issue that came up for a vote. It was a very close vote. My vote mattered; it could well have been the difference.

In the well of the Senate, Senators were explaining the importance of my vote and how important it was. Senator Barbara Mikulski, at that time the only woman in the Senate and one of the nation's feminist leaders, told everyone to leave me alone, my vote was a matter of character. I have been left alone for more than two decades, but there are other Democratic senators who share my pro-life position.

I'm not getting involved in the Democratic primary for President, because there are four Democratic senators running and many other friends.



But regarding the Republican primary, let me say in passing, I hope that Mitt Romney's presidential bid is determined by his political stands, and not his religion.

People say I started life without much. But because of America, it didn't matter the economic station of my parents, the color of my skin, my non-religion, or the size or place of my home.

I am fortunate and now have what I believe to be the world's best job.

Education was the equalizer in my life – it must be for you and for all of us. Those today here assembled come from all backgrounds, all races, from all over our wonderful country and some from countries beyond our borders. The vast majority of you are bound by a common religious belief. With the many blessings you enjoy, including the benefits of this unique, world famous university, you must also accept the responsibility to go a little further than others.

Many have chosen to pursue an educational direction pointed toward a lucrative field of endeavor. There is nothing wrong with seeking a career that will bring you financial success. But never forget the clarion call of King Benjamin: "When you are in the service of your fellow beings you are only in the service of your God."

As I have proceeded through life, I have witnessed many who have made monetary fortunes but have hated their work. I have seen many of modest means who love their profession of occupation. In short, work to be productive. To be happy. As Montaigne said more than 300 years ago, "Living is my job and my art."

To what then, was King Benjamin referring? I believe in today's context he would of course have in mind a Bishop, an Elder's Quorum President, a missionary and of course a home or visiting teacher. But I suggest that King Benjamin would consider the Peace Corps, Teach for America, work in a non-profit to help the poor or the sick as commendable service.

Let me give you an example of public service.

U.S.S Jay Rockefeller rich, very rich-- in fact- while getting on the subway to go from the Hart Office Building to the Capitol was asked, what was in the attache case he was carrying? And he responded MY SPENDING MONEY.

Jay was wealthy, well educated and from New York, when as a young man he volunteered to be part of the Volunteers In Service To America-- he became a Vista Volunteer in West Virginia. After his contact with the poor of Appalachia he never returned to New York and became Secretary State of West Virginia, Governor and now a multi term United States Senator.

That's public service.

I propose King Benjamin then was referring to public service, running for elective office, serving in an appointed government board or commission.

Within the Church there are hundreds and hundreds of examples. From Ezra Taft Benson, while an apostle serving in President Eisenhower's cabinet, or Reed Smoot while an apostle serving in the United States Senate, or David Kennedy serving as Secretary of the Treasury, or Rex Lee as U.S. Solicitor General, or the recently departed Elder James Faust serving in the State legislature, or Elder Oaks serving as a member of the Utah State Supreme Court, or the late Elder Haight, who served as mayor of Palo Alto, California.

Public service is a broad field you owe it to your state, your country and yourself.

Jewish tradition declares – “Ingratitude to man is ingratitude to God.”

President Monson has said, “What an exciting life is available for each of us today. We can be explorers in spirit with a mandate to make this world better by discovering improved ways of living. God left the world unfinished for man to work his skill upon.”

James Fallows, one of America's exemplary journalists, author, commentator, publisher of US News & World Report and much more. Fallows was interviewed on public radio after having been a correspondent in the Far East for many years and was asked "who represents America in the most positive terms overseas?"

Fallows responded, "Members of the Foreign Service, that is, our diplomatic corps. They speak the language and they understand the culture." Peace Corps volunteers, they speak the language, help the poor, the very poor and the underprivileged. And finally, this non-Mormon said, Mormon missionaries.

They speak the language, are cleanly dressed and live with the people, not away from the people. These are examples. They show the beauty and strength of public service by helping others.

As I started this visit with you today, I spoke to you about a communication I had with my sixteen year old granddaughter. I told her about my understanding of faith and stressed a few important principles. I spoke of believing in God even when He is silent.

I am blessed because in my life, God has rarely been silent. Prayer has always been an important part of my adult life. Many of my prayers have been answered. My family has benefited from our ability to communicate with our Father in Heaven.

Recently prayer was so profoundly illustrated by an event in my wife Landra's and my life.

We were at our home in Searchlight. I wanted to show two police officers that were traveling with me a hundred year old rock house that few knew existed. The old abandoned house was in the mountains about nine miles west of Searchlight. The house is several miles from a paved road and is well hidden and very hard to find. Once we were at the location, Landra and I decided to take a walk and we did.

The area was without a road and with heavy, high desert vegetation. We walked for about 30 minutes when Landra, who had been ill, said she wished we had brought water with us. I said I'd run back to the vehicle and get some water, which I did. I ran back where I had left her. But I couldn't locate her.

I yelled and yelled with no response. I again ran back to the car and the police officers. They helped, but couldn't find her. I thought she had fainted and was lying in the heat. The police officers called Las Vegas for backup. After the call to the police in Las Vegas had been made, a lot of time had passed.

All of a sudden we looked up and saw Landra approaching from the totally opposite direction. With joy, we greeted her. She immediately said thanks for firing your gun. She said she knew she was lost and in trouble so when she came to some large power lines, she prayed for help and immediately heard three gun shots and walked in that direction and found us.

We told her that no guns had been fired. And we heard no gunshots. Her prayer, though, had been answered because our Father in Heaven listens.

We must always remember the comprehensive scope of prayer outlined by Alma in the Book of Mormon in the 7<sup>th</sup> Chapter 23<sup>rd</sup> verse: “Be humble, ask for whatever you stand in need – both spiritual and temporal always returning thanks unto God for whatever things you receive.”

I bear testimony of the truthfulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – the foundation for the blessings we now enjoy laid by the young boy and assassinated Prophet Joseph Smith and with certainty, I testify of Gordon B. Hinckley as our modern day prophet.

It is finally my plea and prayer that we will follow the teachings that we know to be true, and in so doing create a better world.