

Family Presentation

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ON FAST SUNDAYS in my home ward we have what's called a "family presentation" during the opening exercises of Sunday School. Usually, the bishop chooses a couple with relatively young children to present a program of their choice. I remember one family with four daughters and a son. They chose the theme "Love At Home." While seated on the stand, the three-year-old son began to pull at the four-year-old's ringlets. (Each girl had careful, blonde ringlets and a pink satin ribbon in her hair. The baby was bald with a pink bow taped to her head.) The mother took his hand and whispered some quiet warning. She had a look of rigid poise. The boy, however, soon resumed his study of his sister's hair; the little girl began to fidget, finally flinging her hand up and hitting him in the face. Mother again intervened. Within moments there were slapped hands and two crying children on the stand.

Perhaps the bishop wanted to avoid another ill-timed conflict, and that's why several months ago he called on my family to put on the program. I'm twenty-two and my younger sister Alexis is sixteen (I haven't tugged at her curls in well over a decade). Or maybe he hoped that the "opportunity" would inspire my two inactive younger brothers to get involved. Or maybe (probably?) he didn't know who else to call—who knows how many mothers of younger children declined the invitation after Sister Allred's fiasco? Whatever the reason, two months ago, with a week and a half's notice, we got the job.

My brother refused to have anything to do with the project. And it was only after coercion that my sister—who not only has ambivalent feelings about the Church but adolescent embarrassment about our family in general—consented to give the opening prayer. That left my parents and me to put on thirty minutes of family presentation. None of us are real speakers—our two-and-a-half minute talks usually wind up at about a minute and forty-five seconds—so that left us with twenty-four minutes to fill in and my mother in a panic.

I suggested we sing a duet. She agreed: even a hyper-vibrato soprano and a tone-deaf alto are better than *nothing*. I also volunteered to play my violin if

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she'd accompany me on the organ. She agreed to that too until she heard me play "A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief." I haven't practiced in over three years. A tone-deaf alto is one thing; a rusty-fingered, tone-deaf violinist is another.

"Why did they ever ask *us* to do this?" Mom groaned at least six times daily. When she was with my father, the query became an accusation: "It's all *your* fault. You're the one who said we would." My dad, who is even less of a private speaker than a public one, said, "In the Church you do what you're asked to." If he hoped to close the issue—it didn't work. I finally convinced Lexie that it was her duty to the family to at least read a poem, or play "I am a Child of God" on the guitar, or, better yet, both. She consented to a twelve-liner by Carol Lynn Pearson.

Every morning for a week my mother had a new version of her talk to read me. (Ever since I won second prize in the Bountiful High School poetry contest, I've been dubbed "the writer of the family.") She wanted suggestions for improvement, and all I had to offer was "sounds real good to me." It did. My mom is fine talk writer, her language honest and uncluttered. We'd chosen "Loving and Serving Others" as our theme and hoped to draw special attention to the needs of those outside the bounds of active church membership. As our preparation for the program progressed, my mother's anxieties increased. We still had only sixteen minutes worth of material, and she felt humiliated that the entire family wasn't participating. My brothers' indifference and my sister's vacillation toward the Church were all the more painful by the realization that, for all intents and purposes, it would be broadcast publicly. Two days in a row she dissolved into tears, saying, "I'm a failure as a mother. Where did I go wrong?" All I could reply was, "You didn't. They did." I wanted to call the bishop myself and say, "Listen, why *did* you call us?"

Saturday night, before the program, my brothers announced that they weren't going to come at all not even to watch us. And Alexis lapsed into one of her semicomatose states of depression: The thought of reading the Pearson poem in public was "absolutely too humiliating," and saying the prayer might injure her moral sensitivities—"too hypocritical. Sometimes I don't even know if I believe in the Church, let alone *like* it." My dad said, "It's your decision." Mom started crying. I said, "You're a selfish brat." She agreed to say the prayer but not the poem. The program was back to fourteen-and-a-half minutes. My father said he would expand his talk to five.

Sunday we were late getting to Church. Our twelve-year-old basset hound had had diarrhea during the night—all over the living room carpet and furniture. (No matter who's waiting for you, you just can't leave your house in *that* kind of a mess.) And my brothers had inexplicably appeared from their basement bedrooms with the news that they were going with us. It took my mother ten minutes to convince them that it was essential they wear *ties* with their sport shirts and cords. At 9:31 we were all seated, my parents and Lexie and me on the stand, my brothers on the back row of the chapel.

As we sat there singing the opening hymn, "High On a Mountain Top," I looked at the congregation. Herm DeMic, a seventy-eight-year-old German convert who had lost two sons in the war, was on the third row holding his wife Evelyn's hand. With each beat in the music he brought their hands down on his knee, marking time. Randy and Kevin Jensen, deacons, were choked with laughter at the chorister, Ethyl Burgstead's vigorous conducting, the heavy white flesh on her upper arms jiggling with every downbeat. Donna Burdett on the front row rocked an irritable baby in one arm while trying to coax Cherrios into the mouth of her restless three-year-old with the other. I wanted to whisper to my mom, "You know, it doesn't matter a damn if our presentation is the greatest." Maybe she was thinking the same thing, because she reached over, squeezed my hand and gave me a closed-mouth smile.

Alexis' prayer was good. She didn't thank God for the nice chapel we have to meet in or bless those who weren't here this time to be here next Sunday. She didn't even mention all the lessons we were supposed to get something out of. It was a plain invocation of the spirit and a recognition that we need help to love each other better. My mother's talk—the eighth revision—lasted over three minutes. Her deep voice was only slightly airy, and she looked beautiful in her navy blue suit and white stocktie blouse. When she closed by quoting Corinthians, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels . . .," I felt my scalp begin to pucker. Then I spoke. I always memorize my talks (I don't have enough faith to let myself be guided *entirely* by the spirit), and third of the way through I lost my train of thought briefly. The few uncomfortable moments were forgotten, though, as the rest of the words flowed easily to a conclusion.

When we sang our duet, "Dear to the Heart of the Shepherd," I sensed something really click. I'd never sung in public before, but I felt oddly relaxed, and for the first time, "Mom and I *really* harmonized. She skipped the third verse by accident, but we covered it up and by the time I sang the last two-measure solo refrain "out in the desert they wander," I felt like a candidate for the Mormon Youth Chorus.

Then my father went to the pulpit. He is not an openly emotional or demonstrative man, and so I was unprepared for what he said: "Brothers and Sisters, I may not have been humble before but I am . . ." He stopped. And he stood there for a long time. When he finally spoke again he said, "I had some words prepared, but somehow they don't seem appropriate now. I love my family." He stopped again. "That's all I want to say." He sat down. I had never seen my father cry before.

Song practice lasted nearly thirty minutes that morning because we had used up only twelve minutes. As the congregation was singing "This Earth was Once a Garden Place," the last hymn in the book, I looked at the people in the chapel. Brother DeMic still held Evelyn's hand. Donna Burdett sang with the baby asleep in her arm. She fingered her three-year-old's curls as the child knelt against the bench coloring on a program. I could hear my brothers singing on the back row.