

# Standards Night

*Ann Cannon*

*This talk was given at the Canyon Rim Stake, Salt Lake City Standards Night meeting, held on April 23, 2014.*

Last spring the daughter of my best friend from graduate school asked if I would speak at her Stake Standards Night. Sophie (whom her mother and I used to call “the Queen of the World” when she was a child) made one request: my talk could NOT be the standard Standards Night talk. She wanted all those young women to walk away from the evening feeling—you know—*upbeat*.

I could relate. I had wonderful Mutual teachers (including my own mother) when I was a teenager, but I hated anything that devolved into another dreaded “chastity talk,” even though (truth be told) I was pretty much a straight arrow who wasn’t overburdened with guilt on that front. It’s just that I wanted to know *why* everybody was so interested in my virginity. And why was it always up to the girl to set boundaries? And please, please, please, why couldn’t we just talk about something else for a change? Like the story of Jacob and Esau, for instance.

Just kidding.

No teenage girl is dying to hear a story about a large hairy redhead who loses his birthright. Frankly, I never did like that story because I have issues with mothers who have favorites and with wives who trick blind husbands. I’ve also never liked the way we interpret the story, i.e. that Esau was a moral pygmy—a very *hungry* moral pygmy—who squandered his future on a bowl of soup (which probably wasn’t even good soup, not unlike those just-add-water soups you buy at the soup bar in a grocery store because you don’t feel like cooking dinner).

Maybe there's another way to read this story. Could it be that Esau undervalued himself? Maybe he didn't think he was worth more than a bowl of mediocre soup. Who knows? Having a mother who clearly prefers your brother can have that effect.

The point is that it's difficult to value yourself when you're young under the best of circumstances—I certainly didn't—and I would have appreciated some practical information about how to honor myself more as a daughter of God beyond the obvious advice about remaining chaste. Thanks to Sophie, I was able to give a talk I might have paid attention to when I was in high school.

Or not.

I was never very good at listening.

But I did appreciate the opportunity to hand out the following completely unsolicited advice to a group of radiant young women.

*1. Do something you're good at.*

A few years ago I read a book called *What Happy People Know* by Dan Baker about “the science of happiness.” I know. Only in America would we a) study “happiness,” and b) call it science. Still, Baker makes the case that happy people lead with their strengths. Painters paint. Engineers engineer. Dancers dance. Too often we focus on the ways we fall short and because we're all about self-improvement as Mormons, we set goals to improve our penmanship or learn how to throw a baseball, just like Heber J. Grant did. (After our Sunday School teacher told us this story, one of the boys asked if Heber J. Grant autographed baseballs when he grew up. The teacher was not amused.)

This impulse is admirable, of course, but do we sometimes stress it at the expense of encouraging one another to embrace our talents and run like crazy with them? I don't know. On the other hand, we all know that it's tremendously satisfying to do those things that we do well.

*2. And as long as we're talking about leading with our strengths, why not notice what other people are good at and praise them.*

The trick here, of course, is not to let jealousy take over if someone excels at something you'd like to be good at, too. I remember

hearing Shannon Hale (author of *The Goose Girl* and *Princess Academy*) talk about her grandmother who always said that indulging in jealousy was like drinking poison and expecting it to hurt the other person.

I used to say that jealousy isn't my besetting sin. I still don't think it is. HOWEVER. I have come to recognize that the green-eyed monster dogs my footsteps more often than it should. And to that end, I've made a conscious effort to celebrate other people's successes with phone calls, notes, flowers, chocolate. This makes them feel good, of course, and it makes me feel good, too.

*3. Don't let others define who you are—especially if that definition is a negative one.*

I have a friend whose interests weren't academic when he was growing up. They still aren't. The problem is that both of his parents were professors, and the message he received from them (unintentionally, I'm sure) is that his gifts were inferior. It's hard to avoid labels when we're growing up. It's hard to resist labeling others. But embracing the idea at a young age that we don't have to accept those labels seems like a positive move.

*4. Exercise.*

I'll never forget the day one of my boys asked me which position I played when I was a kid. Catcher? Pitcher? Third baseman? I told him that I never played on a team while I was growing up. Girls didn't play on teams in those days, especially not a boys' team. My son was dumbfounded because he'd grown up playing baseball, soccer, basketball, and even football with girls. If you were an athletic girl in the days before Title IX like I was, you just tried out for cheerleader.

I am so grateful that girls now have more opportunities to engage in athletic opportunities because regular exercise, I believe, is one of those things that can make you feel better about yourself. Notice how I didn't say "look better"? Exercise may well lead to a lovely physical appearance, but I'm far more interested in what it does for a girl's psyche.

Here's the deal. Crazy runs in my family. Good crazy (Hey! My people and I are always up for a good time!) and sad crazy. Depression. OCD. Anxiety. Over the years I've been grateful for medications that do their work, but I also learned early on that regular exercise works wonders if not exactly miracles. Swimming, running, biking, hitting a tennis ball—movement makes you feel alive in the moment. And strong enough to dwell in that moment, too.

*5. If you have a boyfriend, make sure he treats you well.*

And by this I don't mean, "if you have a boyfriend, make sure he gives you expensive gifts." Don't get me wrong. I love gifts. In fact, feel free to send them to me if you have some spare ones lying around. But the best gift of all is a boyfriend who thinks you're smart, who listens to what you say, who laughs at your jokes. My own father treated me this way, so that by the time I dated, I expected the same consideration from the boys I knew, as well.

By the same token, girls should respect their boyfriends, too—listen to and encourage their dreams. As the mother of (many, many) sons, I appreciate girlfriends and wives who treat those boys with kindness and respect.

*6. Cultivate the ability to laugh at yourself.*

We all do stupid things. The other day, for example, I tried to order a KFC lunch box with a special promotion KFC coupon. The only problem is that I was at Burger King. Oh, oops! Being able to laugh at yourself in such moments instead of hiding in shame (and vowing never to eat at KFC again) displays a certain kind of self-confidence. The person who can laugh is, in effect, saying, "Hey, don't worry about me. I've got this."

People sometimes ask where I get my ideas from—I've been writing a personal column for nearly thirty years now—and I always tell them my best pieces always come out of those moments when I was either angry or frustrated or sad or embarrassed. Oddly, uncomfortable experiences (recollected in tranquility) are often HILARIOUS.

*7. Serve others.*

A friend of ours who's left the church recently told my husband that one of the things he misses about the Mormon world is the opportunities it provides for people to serve—especially those people who aren't particularly adept at seeking out those opportunities for themselves. I think our youth programs do an excellent job of instilling service as a virtue, and I'm grateful for this, because service (to paraphrase some Shakespeare) “blesseth him who gives and him who takes.” I firmly believe that service is soul food. For one thing, it can help us develop empathy.

I remember when I was asked by our Relief Society to help watch the children of a young mother suffering with rheumatoid arthritis. Because I was so young myself, I was full of ideas about how this woman—of whom I was somewhat critical—could better run her life in spite of her illness.

I know. I can't believe it either.

Suffice it to say that spending real time with this woman and her family helped me better understand what all of them faced. And yes. The experience made me a little less judgmental, a little more compassionate.

*8. Don't feel like you have to be like everybody else.*

So my flower garden, which takes up my entire front yard, is pretty much a hot mess. There is a jumble of daffodils and tulips in the spring, daisies and daylilies in the summer, asters and phlox in the fall. Plus more. Way, way, way more. Nasturtiums. Cosmos. Lenten roses. Perennial geraniums. Lambs ear. Hostas. Roses. So on. So forth.

You get the picture.

No one is ever going to give me a ribbon for “design,” let alone “restraint.” I'm pretty much a Big Tent Gardener. I want one of every kind of plant known to man to join in all the garden reindeer games at my house. Why? Because I love them. All of them. (Except for creeping myrtle.)

I love crocuses because they're so optimistic, peeking their little heads out of the snow as if to say Hey! Spring's coming! I

love pansies because (in spite of their names) they're the toughest flowers around. I love peonies because COME ON! They're soft and sexy, and they smell good, too.

And roses.

Roses!

The point is that I love my flowers for their differences as much as for their similarities. And if a human being without very much imagination (like me, for instance) can feel that way, why wouldn't Heavenly Father?

In fact, I think the whole wide shimmering world speaks of Heavenly Father's affection for variety. You see it everywhere from the fish of the sea to the fowl of the air to every living thing that moves.

Including us.

And that's something worth hearing on a Standards Night. Or any night.