

President Monson In Germany

And the bedridden member of the Church

By President Uchtdorf (May 2008 General Conference)

I would like to say a few words about President Thomas S. Monson. Some years ago, President Monson came to a regional conference in Hamburg, Germany, and it was my honor to accompany him. President Monson has a remarkable memory, and we talked about many of the Saints in Germany—I was amazed that he remembered so many so well.

President Monson asked about Brother Michael Panitsch, a former stake president and then a patriarch, who had been one of the stalwart pioneers of the Church in Germany. I told him that Brother Panitsch was seriously ill, that he was bedridden and unable to attend our meetings.

President Monson asked if we could pay him a visit.

I knew that shortly before his trip to Hamburg, President Monson had undergone foot surgery and that he could not walk without pain. I explained that Brother Panitsch lived on the fifth floor of a building with no elevators. We would have to climb the stairs to see him.

But President Monson insisted. And so we went.

I remember how difficult it was for President Monson to climb those stairs. He could take only a few at a time before needing to stop and rest. He never uttered a word of complaint, and he would not turn back. Because the building had high ceilings, the stairs seemed to go on forever, but President Monson cheerfully persevered until we arrived at the apartment of Brother Panitsch on the fifth floor.

Once there, we had a wonderful visit. President Monson thanked him for his life of dedicated service and cheered him with a smile. Before we left, he gave him a wonderful priesthood blessing.

No one but Brother Panitsch, the immediate family, and myself ever saw that act of courage and compassion.

President Monson could have chosen to rest between our long and frequent meetings. He could have asked to see some of the beautiful sights of Hamburg. I have often thought of how remarkable it was that of all the sights in that city, the one he wanted to see more than any other was a feeble and ailing member of the Church who had faithfully and humbly served the Lord.

President Monson came to Hamburg to teach and bless the people of a country, and that is what he did. But at the same time, he focused on the one, name by name. His vision is so broad and far-reaching to grasp the complexities of a worldwide Church, yet he is also so compassionate to focus on the one.

When the Apostle Peter spoke of Jesus, who had been his friend and teacher, he offered this simple description: “[He] went about doing good.”²

I feel the same can be said of the man we sustain today as the prophet of God

A Stake Conference Prompting

Twenty-three-year-old Tom Monson, relatively new bishop of the Sixth-Seventh Ward in the Temple View Stake, was uncharacteristically restless as the stake priesthood leadership meeting progressed. He had the distinct impression that he should leave the meeting immediately and drive to the Veterans' Hospital high up on the Avenues of Salt Lake City. Before leaving home that night he had received a telephone call informing him that an older member of his ward was ill and had been admitted to the hospital for care. Could the bishop, the caller wondered, find a moment to go by the hospital sometime and give a blessing? The busy young leader explained that he was just on his way to a stake meeting but that he certainly would be pleased to go by the hospital as soon as the meeting was concluded.

Now the prompting was stronger than ever: "Leave the meeting and proceed to the hospital at once." But the stake president himself was speaking at the pulpit! It would be most discourteous to stand in the middle of the presiding officer's message, make one's way over an entire row of brethren, and then exit the building altogether. Painfully he waited out the final moments of the stake president's message, then bolted for the door even before the benediction had been pronounced.

Running the full length of the corridor on the fourth floor of the hospital, the young bishop saw a flurry of activity outside the designated room. A nurse stopped him and said, "Are you Bishop Monson?"

"Yes," was the anxious reply.

"I'm sorry," she said. "The patient was calling your name just before he passed away."

Fighting back the tears, Thomas S. Monson turned and walked back into the night. He vowed then and there that he would never again fail to act upon a prompting from the Lord. He would acknowledge the impressions of the Spirit when they came, and he would follow wherever they led him, ever to be "on the Lord's errand."

Adapted primarily from the *Ensign*, February 1986, p. 10.; "Thomas S. Monson..." by [Jeffrey R. Holland](#) (then President of Brigham Young University) and from other material

Growing Up

Thomas Spencer Monson was born on a Sunday morning, 21 August 1927, in Salt Lake City, Utah. His parents, G. Spencer and Gladys Condie Monson, were of hardy Swedish/English and Scottish ancestry respectively—humble, hardworking, loving parents who had already been blessed with a daughter, Marjorie, and later would be blessed with Robert, Marilyn, Scott, and Barbara.

Family, including extended family, played an unusually important role in young Tom Monson's life. His Grandfather Condie had purchased property on the southwest corner of Fifth South and Second West, built his own home there, and provided homes for each of the four Condie daughters and their husbands. These were joyful days filled with continual family get-togethers, not only with the Condie aunts on the same block but also with the Condie uncles out in Granger and the Monson relatives in Murray and Bountiful. And always those idyllic summers at Vivian Park with fishing on the Provo River!

Although his family was without many of the luxuries of life (he remembers how terribly cold his bedroom was in winter), young Tom's tender heart and compassionate nature soon made him aware of the many around him who were less fortunate than he. Unwilling to see the family of one of his childhood friends eat cereal (moistened with hot water rather than milk) for a Christmas dinner, he handed over his two prize rabbits, saying with a lump in his throat, "It isn't turkey, but they will make you a good Christmas dinner."

85 Widows

Indeed, his childhood experiences seem to have been part of a divinely directed training process which would sensitize Thomas Monson to the plight of the poor for the rest of his life. When he later became bishop of that very Sixth-Seventh Ward into which he had been born and raised, he had 1,060 members, including some 85 widows and the largest welfare load in the Church.

Many may know that young Bishop Monson took a week of his personal vacation time every Christmas season to visit all of those eighty-five widows in his ward. Many may not know that for the first several years the gift he would take them was one of the Barded Plymouth Rock or Rhode Island Red hens raised and dressed out by him in his own poultry coops. And although it has been more than thirty years since he was released as their bishop, President Monson has taken a gift and visited every one of those widows every Christmas for as long as each has lived. Some in their final moments have spoken to family members of where he stood in the room and what he said and how very much they loved him.

Furthermore, these sweet folks never seem to die until Brother Monson is back in town from his many assignments, enabling him to speak at their funerals. Perhaps no one in the present leadership of the Church has spoken at so many funerals—he once had three services in one day—and always very personal remarks are given for the sometimes ordinary and otherwise unknown souls that he has met and loved somewhere during his ministry.

“Tom is a man of the common people, the champion of the underdog,” says long-time friend Wendell J. Ashton. “When he brings friends to the basketball games, it isn’t the rich and famous or the leaders from the chamber of commerce. It is a handful of the ordinary folks gathered from his days ‘down by the tracks.’ He is like a pine tree—the top is high and ascending to heaven but the branches are broad, low to the ground, and protective of all who need shelter there.”

Nursing Homes

Few people know it, but Brother Monson is the self-appointed chaplain at a number of nursing homes around town," notes Elder [Boyd K. Packer](#), who sat next to Elder Monson in the Quorum of the Twelve for fifteen years. "He visits them anytime his busy schedule will permit, and sometimes even when it doesn't permit."

(A well-meaning person once told President Monson that it was useless for him to visit these elderly people, talking at length with them when they seldom answered a word. "You might as well save your time and breath, Elder Monson. They don't know who you are.")

"Whether they know me or not is beside the point," the determined Thomas Monson replied. "I don't talk to them because they know me; I talk to them because I know them.")

W. James Mortimer, publisher of the Deseret News and longtime friend, observes: "I have served in business, church, and personal capacities with President Monson for the past twenty-five years. He is one of a kind. His strength is evident, but it is always blended with humility. His intellect is keen but always tempered with wisdom. The power he holds is always exercised with sound judgment. Through service and loyalty he has earned the love others have for him."

Elder [James E. Faust](#), President Monson's associate in the Quorum of the Twelve, suggests that "no one in this world is more loyal than Tom Monson. Once you are Tom's friend, you are his friend forever. That mind of his doesn't forget anything, but neither does his heart—especially people."

The Kind of Boy He Was

President Monson was “up-and-doing,” developing such loyalties and devotedly serving others very early in his life. “He was the kind who accomplished what most boys don’t,” says John R. Burt, a lifelong friend, former bishop, and one who served with Brother Monson as a counselor in the Temple View Stake presidency. “He’d meet with his quorum counselors and stir things up, even as a youngster. Usually you have to do a lot of prodding with young boys, but not with Tom. He was always ready to do something worthwhile.

“That skill has continued with him. I’ve never seen him take the leadership of any project that didn’t do well. He has a great spiritual attitude about him that moves the work. He’s a great administrator and a spiritual giant.”

A Marriage Made In Heaven

One of the sweetest chapters in a book of life filled with things of the heart and of the spirit begins with President Monson's courtship of Frances Johnson. "Mom is the other half of Dad's success story, the half no one really knows," says their daughter Ann Monson Dibb. "He gave a conference address once entitled 'Anonymous' about people who serve so faithfully and give so much, yet never seek recognition. That talk applies beautifully to my mother; maybe he even wrote it with her in mind. He couldn't have done what he has done without her."



It was obviously to be a marriage-made-in-heaven when on that first evening as young Tom called at the Johnson household, Brother Franz Johnson said, "Monson! Monson! That's a Swedish name, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir!" the young suitor quickly reassured him.

At that, Brother Johnson went to the bureau drawer and brought out a picture of two missionaries in their top hats. He said, pointing to one of them, "Are you related to this Monson?"

"Yes, sir, that is Elias Monson, my great-uncle," affirmed the young visitor.

Brother Johnson's eyes filled with tears as he exclaimed, "He was one of the missionaries who helped bring the gospel to my mother and father and my entire family in the land of Sweden." On that strong foundation, the romance between Tom and Frances flourished and the two were married in the Salt Lake Temple for time and eternity on 7 October 1948. "Tom was serving as ward clerk, then as superintendent of the YMMIA when we were first married, and he has gone from one assignment to another since then," Sister Monson recalls. "Some have asked how a new bride adjusts to that, but it has never been a sacrifice to see my husband doing the Lord's work. It has blessed me, and it has blessed our children. He always knew that if it was for the Church, I expected him to do what he had to do."

"In thirty-seven years of marriage I have never known Frances to complain once of my Church responsibilities," says President Monson lovingly. "In those thirty-seven years I have been gone many days and many nights, and I have rarely been able to sit with her in the congregation. But there is no one like her—absolutely no one. She is in every way supportive and is a woman of quiet and profoundly powerful faith."

With Frances at his side and increasing Church responsibilities coming at every turn, Brother Monson continued the preparation that would one day aid him in his service as a counselor in the First Presidency of the Church.

Education

Strongly committed to education (he holds a Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of Utah and an Honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Brigham Young University, on whose Board of Trustees he sits), Tom graduated cum laude in business administration from the University of Utah in 1948. “Tom was an outstanding student,” remembers Dr. O. Preston Robinson, Brother Monson’s former department head at the “U”. “He got straight A’s in everything he did. I could see right then that the world was certain to hear more of him. He started out working for me at the university, then taught with me, then joined me at the Deseret News. Later it was my privilege to work for him. I can’t say enough of him as a man and as a true friend. I love him like a son.” In a remarkable display of determination, President Monson would later finish an M.B.A. degree at BYU several years after being called as a General Authority.

Career and Mission President

The early career in advertising sales and management at the Deseret News (of which he became the president and chairman of the board) and later the Deseret Press (of which he was to become general manager) was interrupted by service as president of the Canadian Mission from 1959 to 1962. The mission covered a very large geographical area, with no stakes and few adequate buildings.

“He had a dramatic impact on that mission,” remembers former missionary F. Wayne Chamberlain. “Here he was, younger than some of the full-time elders. But the minute he arrived in Toronto he was in charge. In one quick tour of the mission he knew every missionary’s name and many of the members. He lifted everyone, everywhere he went—he completely energized the entire mission. With what I saw there, I truly believe he could have become the successful chief executive officer of any major corporation in the world.” Needless to say, the work of the Church flourished in eastern Canada under this young president’s direction.

Just a little more than a year and a half after his return to Salt Lake City, and after having served on several general committees of the Church, Thomas S. Monson was called to be a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles on 4 October 1963.

Community Involvement

In addition to Brother Monson's apostolic labor, there came significant professional and civic duties as well, including service on the boards of KSL, Bonneville International Corporation, Mountain Bell, Commercial Security Bank, Beneficial Life Insurance Company, Utah State System of Higher Education's Board of Regents, National Executive Board of the Boy Scouts of America (from which he received Scouting's prestigious Silver Buffalo Award) and President Ronald Reagan's Task Force for Private Sector Initiatives.

"Tom moves with equal ability and ease as a leader among members and nonmembers alike," muses Elder Neal A. Maxwell, Quorum of the Twelve associate. "His administrative strength and executive ability are not to be wholly accounted for in his academic training or professional opportunities, distinguished as they are. It is something more fundamental than that—something inherent and innate. He doesn't need twenty years with an issue to grasp its significance and retain its meaning. He has devoured the contents of most matters while everybody else is still trying to get the wrapper off."

John W. Gallivan, a member of the Roman Catholic Church, a leader in the Salt Lake community, and past publisher of the Salt Lake Tribune, comments: "If he's ever met you, Tom Monson is your friend. This warm, genuine, gregarious man doesn't love his neighbor because that is the mandate; Tom Monson is your friend because he loves mankind. That's his nature. The Church gave this community special unification through friendship when it elevated Tom Monson to the First Presidency."

His diplomatic skill in working with non-LDS groups is very evident in President Monson's nearly two decades of work in the countries of Eastern Europe. Following his efforts in helping to create the first stake there in August of 1982, a personal dream was fulfilled when a temple was dedicated on 29 June 1985, in Freiberg, German Democratic Republic.

"If it weren't for Brother Monson, there would be little for our Saints in this part of Europe," says close friend and Europe Area President [Joseph B. Wirthlin](#). "Now we have stakes, wards, chapels and—miracle of miracles—a temple. Tom has given everything to those people, including the shirt off his back. I mean it! I've seen him give away his suits and his shirts and his shoes. I'll bet he's given away twenty suits to those destitute Saints in Eastern Europe. He says they were used, old ones that he was going to throw away, but they always looked brand new to me."

"His life is as systematic as his mind," reveals President Monson's capable secretary Lynne F. Cannegieter. "He never puts anything off, and it seems that he never ever forgets anything."

An Unexpected Blessing

One weekend in August 1974 an unexpected change of conference assignment came, sending Elder Monson to the Shreveport Louisiana Stake. The Saturday afternoon schedule was filled with a busy slate of meetings. Rather apologetically, the stake president asked Brother Monson if time would permit him to provide a blessing to ten-year-old Christal Methvin, who was afflicted with cancer. Brother Monson said he would be pleased to do so and then asked if she would be coming to the conference meetings or if she were confined to a Shreveport hospital. Almost reluctantly, the stake president said Christal was unable to leave her home many miles from Shreveport.

Elder Monson examined the meeting schedule and found that there simply was no available time. As an alternative, he suggested that she be remembered in the public prayers which would be offered throughout the conference. Surely, he consoled, the Lord would understand and bless the Methvin family accordingly.

Prior to the stake conference, and unbeknown to Brother Monson, Christal had lost her leg to surgery, only to discover later that the cancer had spread to her tiny lungs. A trip had been planned to Salt Lake City, where she might receive a blessing from one of the General Authorities. The Methvins knew none of the Brethren personally, so they placed before Christal a picture of all the Church leaders. She pointed to the photograph of Elder Thomas S. Monson and said, "I would like him to give me a blessing."

But Christal's condition had deteriorated so rapidly that the flight to Salt Lake City had to be cancelled. She was growing weaker in body but not in faith. She said, "Since a General Authority is coming to our stake conference, why not Brother Monson? If I can't go to him, the Lord can send him to me." At about the same time, Brother Monson received the unexpected change in his stake conference assignment which sent him to Shreveport.

As one final favor to Christal, the family agreed to kneel by her bedside and ask for just one more blessing; the chance to enjoy Brother Monson's personal visit.

After receiving word from the stake president that Brother Monson would be unable to visit

Christal because of the extremely tight meeting schedule, the Methvins were understandably very disappointed. They knelt again around Christal's bedside, pleading for a final favor on her behalf: that somehow her desire for a blessing at the hands of Brother Monson would be realized.

At the very moment the Methvin family knelt around Christal's bed, Elder Monson was shuffling his notes, preparing to speak at the concluding portion of the Saturday evening session. However, as he began his move to the pulpit, a voice whispered in near-audible tones a brief but very familiar message: "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God."

His notes became a blur. He attempted to pursue the theme of the meeting as outlined, but the name and image of Christal Methvin would not leave his mind. Then, ever faithful to the precious gift so demonstrably his, he responded to the spiritual message. He instructed that changes in the next day's conference schedule be made, whatever the cost in confusion and disruption. Then the meeting continued.

After a very early Sunday drive over many miles, Elder Monson gazed down upon a child too ill to rise, too weak to speak. Her illness had now rendered her sightless. Deeply touched by the scene and the Spirit of the Lord which was so prevalent, Brother Monson dropped to his knees and took the child's frail hand in his own. "Christal," he whispered, "I am here."

With great effort she whispered back, "Brother Monson, I just knew you would come."

A blessing was pronounced commending a sweet child's body and spirit to the loving watchcare of her Heavenly Father, who surely must have been observing that tender scene. Her barely audible "Thank you" gave eloquent benediction to the blessing and to the sweet life of faith she had lived. The next Thursday, as she was being remembered in the prayer circle of the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve where Elder Monson had placed her name, Christal Methvin's pure spirit left its disease-ravaged body and entered the paradise of God.

As a Father

Even though their father has been very busy all of their lives, the three Monson children do not see themselves as having been slighted. "Other children's fathers seemed to be home more than our dad was," they remembered, "but they didn't seem to do as much with their children as Dad did with us. We were always doing something together, and we cherish those memories."

The Monson's oldest son, Tom, said he hardly ever had free time with his dad during those demanding years in the Canadian Mission (the Monsons had three days in three years when they ate alone as a family, exclusive of missionaries or other mission guests). Nevertheless, every night before young Tommy went to bed, he would go upstairs to his father's office and whatever his dad was doing would be put aside in deference to a game of checkers. "In its own way, that memory is as sweet to me as the one I have of my father flying all the way to Louisville, Kentucky, years later to give me a blessing against the pneumonia I had contracted during my military basic training there," Tom said.

Ann remembers that although the ubiquitous briefcase was always open and her father was always reading some necessary papers, he made his children feel part of his ministry and invariably shared spiritual experiences from his assignments. "My fondest memories," she says, "are of him coming home Sunday evenings after a stake conference assignment or mission tour and hearing him tell of the special inspiration he had in calling a patriarch or of the faith-promoting experiences he had interviewing missionaries." There were plenty of such stories for the Monson children to enjoy because daily, weekly, monthly their father was having special impressions and inspired promptings regarding calls to be extended and actions to be taken.

Clark was deeply touched when, on a typically marvelous Monson fishing experience, his father asked him to reel in his line for a moment. When the lines were in and the rods set aside in the boat, Brother Monson said, "In about five minutes your brother Tom will be sitting down to take the bar exam admitting him to the practice of law. He has worked hard through three years of law school for this and he will be a little apprehensive. Let's just kneel here in the boat. I'll offer a prayer for him, and then you offer one."

That was one of the greatest experiences of my life," Clark later reported. He was also deeply touched years later when his father turned the car around and drove forty miles out of his way to let Clark get a good look at a hawk's nest located near Randolph, Utah. "I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that he would do that. It's exactly the kind of thing he has done all his life for those he sees in need."