

AN INTELLECTUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY: SOME HIGH AND LOW POINTS

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Those who ask, "What is the meaning of life?" and get no reassuring answers have been known to conclude that the whole thing is a cruel joke. If we are supposed to find the answers, they say, why are they hidden? Precisely because we are supposed to find them, which means we must look for them; the treasure is buried to keep us digging, the pearl of great price lies glittering in the depths where we must seek it out. Treasure hunts can be both instructive and fun, provided the clues are not too discouraging, and kind Providence has strewn the most exciting and obvious clues all over the place. It is only when we choose to ignore them, like the pigheaded constable in the English murder mystery, blind to all but his own opinion, that we court frustration and cynicism.

As an infant I entertained an abiding conviction that there were things of transcendent import awaiting my attention. So I kept wandering away from where I was supposed to be. Adults find that attitude upsetting; the scientist or scholar who looks twice before formulating a conclusion has only scorn for the layman who looks only once, but he will give a bad time to any student of his who presumes to look farther than he has, and can never forgive the younger person who actually discovers something. Yet from every side the hints continue to pour in, as they have since the beginning of time; every decibel or photon brings to our human perceptrs more information than anyone has yet deciphered. My own reactions to these generous stimuli have been inadequate and hesitant, but the hints themselves may be worth mentioning. Here are some of the more potent ones, registered decade by decade.

The 1910s. In Portland in 1910 the great rain forests began a few miles from our home on every side, proclaiming in their primal magnificence the kind of world God intended this to be. But

the world that men were hewing out of the forest was something else. My grandparents, especially Grandma Sloan, still believed that we were in the last days, and could tell us why. Everybody else, including my parents, was cool to that idea—progress and prosperity were the watchword. And what did the signals say? As we stood on the little station platform at Gearhart Beach at the end of our last summer there, the family could hear a lumber company a mile away in the towering woods noisily beginning what was to be the total destruction of the greatest rain forest in the world. My father obligingly explained that the lumber company was only acting in the national interest, since spruce wood makes the best propellers, and a strong air force is necessary to a strong and free America. But it was another message that reached and offended childish ears from that misty battleground of man against nature. A little later I understood better what was going on.

The 1920s. I began my second decade in southern California as a compulsive reader, memorizing Shakespeare plays and aspiring to add something to the Bard's modest contribution. But English literature I soon found to be derivative, and so took to Old English to find what was behind it; what was behind it was Latin, and what was behind that was Greek. In those days we thought that you had reached the beginning of everything with the Greeks. Ministers and missionaries retiring to southern California in the twenties flooded the dusty bookstores on Main, Spring, and Los Angeles streets with an astonishing wealth of antique and exotic texts (at two bits a volume), thus abetting and implementing my undisciplined researches. But if you really want to get back of reality, science is the thing; and, as Karl Popper assures us, all science is cosmology. I became a passionate amateur astronomer. Only to discover that everybody wanted to be a scientist, while all the written records of the race, as legitimate an object of purely scientific interest as any fossil or spectrum, were consigned to all but total neglect in the hands of esthetes and pedants. I began to suspect that the records had something very important to convey to us, hints and clues that lay waiting in densely compacted deposits of the human past—others were busy in the lab, but who really cares what is in the stacks?

In the twenties, business was booming, as you may have heard, and I got a good look at some big men who played golf at Brentwood, Wilshire, and the L.A. Country Club; dull, profane men they were, who cheated on every stroke, just about. When my admiring father asked one of them at dinner what he considered to be his greatest achievement in life, the man unhesitatingly

replied that it was his celebrated filibuster to keep James Joyce's *Ulysses* (a book of which, as literature, I was very fond) out of the land. One summer, at fifteen, I worked in the Nibley-Stoddard sawmill in the Feather River Canyon and came to know all manner of men. Later my grandfather (Charles W. Nibley), impressed by my premature pedantry, told me how much money was made in the lumber business, a painful theme that cannot be pursued at this time. The thing for schoolboys to do in those halcyon days was to work in mills or ranches in the summer, or to become seasonal tramps. Full of the Concord School, I spent six weeks alone in the Umpqua forest between Crater Lake and the Three Sisters, quite a wild place then, and learned that nature is kind but just and severe—if you get in trouble you have yourself to thank for it. It was another story down in the valley, where I learned that there were kindhearted tramps who knew far more than any teacher I had had—I mean about literature and science—but tramped because they preferred passing through this world as observers of God's works. For such a luxury they paid a heavy price: in any small town in the nation anyone not visibly engaged either in making or spending money was quickly apprehended and locked up as a dangerous person—a vagrant. Everywhere, I learned very well, the magic words were, "Have you any money?" Satan's golden question. Freedom to come and go was only for people who had the stuff—in fact you could have anything in this world for it.

Within a year the tramping continued, this time among the amused or resentful villagers of the Black Forest and the Rhine Plain. President Tadge, one of the few great men I have known, allowed me to do it my way. By bicycle in summer and afoot in winter I went alone (my companions thought I was overdoing it) carrying the gospel to Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist (they were the toughest) villages. The people were still peasants in those days, living in the Middle Ages in their wildly picturesque storybook towns. Surprising enough, the work was not entirely unsuccessful—the gospel message readily leapt the immense cultural gap, passing through the ever-so-tenuous medium of faith that is common to all cultures and all religions. It was a different story when I knocked on the doors of professors and industrialists in the university and factory towns. German Wissenschaft had long since severed all ties with any gospel but its own proud, self-contained positivism; literally they were without a culture and without religion. The hints were clear enough: the infernal machine of our age was made in Germany.

At the end of my mission President Tadge let me go to Greece to carry messages to some native members of the Church and to make contact with some who had recently migrated from Turkey in a great influx of refugees. Those marvelous Greeks, cheerful and courteous, exuding the spirit of good will, with nothing to eat and nowhere to live! I took long walks, sleeping in the hills, and had a shock from which I never recovered. While I was circulating among displaced persons (under surveillance, of course) my stuff was stolen from the flea-bag hotel where I was staying. That made me an outcast among the outcasts. I spoke English, but also German and French, and my clothes were certainly not American—how could suspicious officials know where I really came from or what I might be running away from? My passport turned up at the American Express, but that was not the problem. By what right did I lay claim to affluence and security while all the people around me had none? How could a few rubber stamps place me in an exalted station? True, the stamps were only symbols, like money, but symbols of what? Hadn't those others worked as hard as I? Worse still, what was I if my sacred identity depended on who somebody else said or believed I was? If a bored petty official had decided not to make some phone calls, I could have become a nonperson forever. Legal fictions had supplanted intrinsic worth and faith in God and man; it was the papers that everybody was grabbing for in those desperate times. And what were the papers really worth? I soon found out when I returned to the big house in Glendale on January 1, 1930, and was told how many thousand American millionaires had just become paupers overnight.

The 1930s. At UCLA I quickly learned the knack of getting grades, a craven surrender to custom, since grades had little to do with learning. Still, that was during the Depression, when people of little faith were clinging to institutions for survival, and so I went along, as timid and insecure as the rest of them. What sort of thinking went on there? The man I worked for as an assistant refused to read Spengler, "because he is not even a full professor!" Staggering, isn't it? I have never thought of an answer to that one. Nobody stood alone; the only way they all stayed on their feet was by leaning on each other for support, like a stand of toothpicks. Berkeley was more of the same, with one difference—they had a library. I decided to put it all together in the stacks beginning at the southwest corner of the ninth level and working down to the northeast corner of the first level, book by book, stopping

whenever something significant caught my eye. It took four years, and then one day a cardboard tube came in the mail. It contained another passport, this time even more magical than the one with the rubber stamps. I may have forgotten the very names of the courses and teachers that qualified me as a PhD, but this pretty document assured me that from here on it was all safely stored in steel filing cabinets in the registrar's office.

I had started out at Berkeley as Professor Popper's only pupil in Arabic (next year there were three of us in Hebrew), and spent an awful lot of time at it, which could have been better spent elsewhere. But what an Aladdin's cave of hints! All an Arabic writer will ever give you is hints, and you build up your world from them. The most illustrious visiting scholar of the time was Werner Jaeger, who favored me with long chats and frank revelations over the teacups (my refusal to drink the stuff made an indelible impression on him and his wife). Professor Jaeger knew very well, he told me, that the Greeks were part of a wider Oriental complex, but he had to bypass all that in his study of the Greek mind, because it tended to disturb the neatness and balance of his great work on Greek education. Typical was the committee's rejection of my first subject for a thesis: I wanted to write about the perennial phenomena of the mob in the ancient world; but the committee found the subject altogether too unreal, too irrelevant to the mood and spirit of the modern world, to appeal even to normal curiosity. How could you expect such men to be aware of the desperately lonely and unhappy young people all around them, seething with resentment and building up to some kind of an explosion (which occurred in the '60s), frustrated at every turn as they asked for the bread of life and got only processed academic factory food served at an automat?

At Claremont Colleges I taught everything under the sun, including American civilization on alternate days with Everett Dean Martin (who was still famous then) and junior humanities alternating with Ed Goodspeed, retired from the University of Chicago. I also taught the history of education and received the most sinister vibrations of all: it took no prophetic gift to see that no good could come of the highly successful efforts of Dewey, Kilpatrick, and the rest, to supplant all religion and culture by their own brand of the new, emancipated, manipulated society. At the request of President Russell M. Storey (the second great man I have known), I took notes when a few celebrities would gather at his house in connection with the work of a committee on war

objectives and peace aims. There we could talk with such notables as Lewis Mumford, T. V. Smith, Thomas Mann, and Edward S. Corvin. It was heady stuff, but very soon I was getting a much more instructive view of the scene from closer up.

The 1940s. In high school I had won the proficiency medal as the best soldier in the ROTC. Now I was a master sergeant doing paperwork in military intelligence at every level and keeping my eyes open. Mr. Tucker used to come down from Washington to Camp Ritchie with exciting news of what went on in high places; for example, there was the fabulous Miss Crawford in the British War Office who knew every secret of the German Army; and in time, behold, it was I who ended up as Miss Crawford's assistant, she being a fussy redheaded spinster who got all her information from newspapers and magazines and kept all the clippings stirred up in a shoebox. That is how it is done. The army is correctly defined (by Robert Heinlein) as "a permanent organization for the destruction of life and property." The business of the 101 A/B Division, to which I was attached through the winter of '43 and all of '44, was to search out and destroy; all the rest of the vast military enterprise was simply supportive of that one objective. "Good hunting!" was the general's stock admonition before take-off. My business was to know more about the German Army than anyone else and to brief division personnel at every level on that meaningful subject both before and during operations. What I saw on every side was the Mahan Principle in full force, that "great secret" of converting life into property—your life for my property, also your life for my promotion (known as the Catch 22 principle). Attached to army groups and various intelligence units during 1945, I took my jeep all over western Europe and beheld the whole thing as a vast business operation. I well remember the pain and distress expressed at headquarters as the war wound down and twilight descended on brilliant military careers, high living, and unlimited financial manipulations; and how great was the rejoicing when the new concept of "brush-fire wars" was announced to the staff—a simple plan to keep the whole thing going, safely contained and at a safe distance. O peace, where is thy sting? The Mahan Principle was still in full force and remains so to this day.

After the War I worked for the *Improvement Era* on the top floor of the stately Church Office Building on South Temple Street in Salt Lake City and came to know another kind of headquarters. I also got to know some of the General Authorities quite well.

There were scientists, scholars, and even poets among their number. One useful thing on the premises was a good collection of anti-Mormon literature. So when Mrs. Brodie's highly fictitious biography of Joseph Smith appeared I became involved in that direction: what I said about Mrs. B. and her methods is exactly what more competent reviewers have said about her more recent *Life of Jefferson*. The bona fides of the Prophet center around the Book of Mormon—another happy coincidence: on the eve (week) of the Normandie invasion I had in London blown all my savings on Arabic books from the collections of Howells and Ellis, both of whom had conveniently died at that point in time. Lacking other sources, I turned to my own books for an Old World approach to the Book of Mormon that kept me going for years.

The 1950s. In 1950 the Dead Sea Scrolls began to come out, along with the equally interesting Coptic texts from Nag Hammadi in Egypt, fusing early Judaism and Christianity in a way that conventional churches and scholars found very disturbing but which fit the Book of Mormon like a glove. Then in 1951 Brigham Young University acquired both the Greek and Latin *Patrologiae* and the Egyptian collection of the venerable S. A. B. Mercer, he who had spearheaded the attack on the book of Abraham back in 1912. Here indeed was a treasure trove of hints, including some very enlightening ones about Mercer himself. At last we had something to work with in the *Patrologiae*. But to be taken seriously one must publish, and I soon found that publishing in the journals is as easy and mechanical as getting grades: I sent out articles to a wide variety of prestigious journals and they were all printed. So I lost interest. What those people were after is not what I was after. Above all, I could see no point to going on through the years marshalling an ever-lengthening array of titles to stand at attention some day at the foot of an obituary. That is what they were all working for, and they were welcome to it. But there were hints I could not ignore and answers I must seek for my own peace of mind. There was one thing every student of the past has overlooked: here at our doorsteps among Arizona Indians lies the world's best clue to the spiritual history of the race; nowhere else on earth will one find the old cycle of the Year Rites still observed in full force and unbroken continuity from the beginning. When Brother Vergil Bushman, a great missionary to the Hopis, started taking me to the villages with him I could hardly credit the devotion and courage with which a little band of less than five thousand people had kept alive a language and a

culture which preserved the practices and beliefs of our own ancestors from prehistoric times until nineteenth-century industrialism severed the umbilical cord. Here the clues are both exhilarating and depressing, hopeful and sinister as nowhere else.

The 1960s. The fifties ended in Berkeley as a visiting professor in humanities, with Classical Rhetoric as the main subject. As in the novels of C. P. Snow, the faculty there had but one objective in life—to achieve eminence—and all labored under the pathetic illusion that mere association with a prestigious institution was the nearest thing to human satisfaction that this life could offer. As to the single-minded dedication to the search for truth, forget it! Take away the audience, and the great professor quickly lapses into the easy hobbies and trivialities of retirement. With nobody looking on, the game loses all its interest. And there is nothing else, for “how can ye believe, which receive honour of one another?” (John 5:44). At Berkeley I put too much religion into my teaching; one young man came to me with a delicate problem—his parents, he said, had been careful to give him the most proper and respectable education available, and now he was going to have to break the painful news to them—that he had discovered that there is a God. How could he do it gently?

Along with teaching I sweated for a year at Egyptian and Coptic with a very able and eager young professor. The Coptic would be useful, but Egyptian? At my age? As soon as I got back to Provo I found out. People in Salt Lake were preaching around that Joseph Smith’s fatal mistake was to commit himself on matters Egyptian—safe enough in his own day, but now that Egyptian could be read it was a trap from which there was no escape. This pressure kept me at Egyptian, in which I was still far from competent, but gradually it began to appear that it was really the experts who, by their premature commitments, were getting themselves into a trap. A trip to Jordan in 1964 cooled me somewhat toward the Arabs and turned me more than ever to the Scrolls. Then in 1966 I studied more Egyptian in Chicago, thanks to the kind indulgence of Professors Baer and Wilson, but still wondered if it was worth all the fuss. When lo, in the following year came some of the original Joseph Smith papyri into the hands of the Church; our own people saw in them only a useful public relations gimmick, but for the opposition they offered the perfect means of demolishing Smith once and for all. Not yet confident in Egyptian, I frankly skirmished and sparred for time, making the most of those sources which support the book of Abraham from

another side, the recent and growing writings, ancient and modern, about the forgotten legends and traditions of Abraham: they match the Joseph Smith version very closely.

The 1970s. The reading of the Abraham apocrypha inevitably led to Enoch documents and the discovery that Joseph Smith had given us among other things a perfectly good book of Enoch which rang up an astonishing number of stunning parallels when I started to compare it with the growing catalogue of newly discovered Enoch manuscripts. But my obsession of the 1970s has been the temple.

The essential information for solving almost any problem or answering almost any question is all *brought* together in the scriptures; but it is not *put* together for us there. Learned divines for sixty generations have argued about that, and the vast bulk of their writings is eloquent witness to their perplexity. And this is where the temple comes in. Without the temple any civilization is an empty shell, a structure of custom and convenience only. The churchmen, posing with too much dexterity to accommodate their teachings to the scientific and moral tenets of the hour, present a woeful commentary on the claims of religion to be the sheet anchor of civilization and morality. Where is the unshakable rock, the *shetiyah*? It is the temple.

Five days a week between three and four o'clock in the morning, hundreds of elderly people along the Wasatch Front bestir themselves to go up and begin their long hours of work in the temple, where they are ready to greet the first comers at 5:30 a.m. At that time, long before daylight, the place is packed, you can't get in, so I virtuously wait until later, much later, in the day. Whatever they may be up to, here is a band of mortals who are actually engaged in doing something which has not their own comfort, convenience, or profit as its object. Here at last is a phenomenon that commands respect in our day and could safely be put forth among the few valid arguments we have to induce the Deity to spare the human race: thousands of men and women putting themselves out for no ulterior motive. There is a touch of true nobility here. What draws them to the temple? There is no music, pageantry, or socializing to beguile the time; none of us begins to grasp the full significance of what is going on, yet nobody seems bored. Why is that? I can only speak for myself, harking back to the subject of hints, those countless impulses with which our perceptors are being bombarded by day and night. For thousands of years the stars have gone on sending us their hints,

broadcasting unlimited information if we only knew it; now at last we are reacting to a narrow band on the informational spectrum, putting clues together in a way the ancients never did. But also we are beginning to suspect that there were times when the ancients reacted to another band of the spectrum which is completely lost on us. The temple, as the very name proclaims, is a place where one takes one's bearings on the universe. What goes on there is confidential, and must remain so until both the Mormons and the outside world are in a better position to understand it. Meanwhile, I write this almost fifty years to the day since the bewildering experience of my own endowment; I have just returned from the temple again where this day I made a most surprising and gratifying discovery. If I went to the temple five times and nothing happened, I would stop going. But I've gone hundreds of times, and the high hopes of new knowledge with which I go up the hill every week are never disappointed.

Since a highly competent young man has become the director of Ancient Studies, the BYU campus has been visited by a dozen or so top authorities in biblical and related studies. Though they are far ahead of me, they are nonetheless schoolmen like myself, and it is only fair to let the ingenuous reader know that we are for the most part simply conscientious grinds, who got good grades and stayed on at school, moving into departmental slots conveniently vacated by the death of older (and usually better) scholars; then travelling all over to exchange commonplaces and read papers with our peers abroad in the world. As to research, we paw over large deposits of neglected material until we find something that nobody has noticed for a long time; then we write about it, and that is a contribution. The discovery of new documents has turned scholarship to translating again, which is too bad, because translating is the last resort of the resourceless mind—anybody can do it, and nobody can be expected to do it perfectly. Today as ever, to be a diligent tabulator keeping well within party guidelines is what passes as scholarly integrity. What can I say when we cautious, mincing souls, who consider ourselves illustrious if we can come up with an idea or two in thirty years, presume to take the measure of Joseph Smith?

At the present moment the hints and clues are pouring in from all sides with the accelerating tempo of a Geiger counter gone mad, and the interpretation thereof is as certain as it is disturbing: good news for those who wait with the Saints, disturbing news for all the rest. Grandma was right.