Zuned to the Work Joseph and Hyrum's Emotional Labor

hanks to David Whitmer, we have record of an incident that took place while Joseph Smith was translating the plates of the Book of Mormon at the Whitmer home in Fayette, New York. David says Joseph got out of sorts over a problem with Emma: "Something went wrong about the house, and [Joseph] was put out about it."¹ Two stunning details emerge from the account. First, when Joseph returned to the upstairs room where David and Oliver Cowdery were waiting for him to resume the translation, Joseph "could not do anything. He could not translate a single syllable."²

Whitmer does not say how long Joseph struggled to translate; he does say (and this is the second point) that he left the room, went out into the orchard nearby, and prayed. Joseph "was gone about an hour—came back to the house, and asked Emma's forgiveness and then came upstairs where we were and then the translation went on all right."³

Clearly, Joseph's emotional life was important to his spiritual life and leadership. In this chapter I explore the emotional dimensions of the ministries of the Prophet Joseph and his brother Hyrum. I will focus primarily on Joseph, but Hyrum too plays an indispensable role in this drama of emotional leadership.

A Broad-Ranging Emotional Life

Joseph said his own disposition was "cheery" (Joseph Smith—History 1:28), but beyond this his personality was deep and complex, and his emotional life broad-ranging. The intensity and candor of Joseph's discourse, as well as the passion of his relationships with people, sometimes does not fit our current ideas of the behavior of a prophet. Even then, Rachel Grant, a convert who knew Joseph and Hyrum well, observed that the sober and sedate Hyrum struck her as more like a prophet than the cheerful and extroverted Joseph, adding this qualification: "You see there was a great deal of sectarianism about me."⁴ Like Rachel Grant, we too might view Joseph Smith through the lenses of our own culture and see a greater range of emotions than we are used to seeing in a Church leader.

Joseph tried to prepare people for his own human foibles. He warned the Saints not to expect perfection from him; if they did, he said, he would have to expect perfection of them.⁵ He further warned them to expect not only imperfections in their leaders but also bitter setbacks as a result of opposition and circumstance. He taught these principles more explicitly later in his mission than in the early days at Kirtland; by the time Nauvoo was established, Joseph had learned to manage the expectations of arriving converts. He and Hyrum signed a proclamation to Saints gathering in Nauvoo cautioning them against impatience or resentment when their expectations weren't fulfilled.⁶ Joseph and Hyrum had learned much by the Nauvoo era about schooling their own feelings, and they often admonished the Saints to school theirs.

Building Strong Relationships

Like all leaders, Joseph had to work at two things at once: the task at hand (building a temple or leading Zion's Camp) and the human relationships through which the task is accomplished. Every leader must learn how to manage this classic tension between accomplishing a mission and supporting the people who perform it.⁷

Joseph brought much intensity to the task of building relationships. In most cases, his strong affection for people inspired their loyalty and devotion. When Elder Parley P. Pratt arrived at the Nauvoo river dock on his return from a mission, Joseph embraced him and wept freely. Though in tears himself, Elder Pratt provided comic relief by saying, "Why, Brother Smith, if you feel so bad about our coming home, I guess we will have to go back again."⁸

At deeply spiritual or emotional times, it was often Joseph who wept, rejoiced, embraced those around him, and openly expressed his feelings. Lucy Mack Smith recorded that when Joseph heard about the driving of the Saints from their homes in Missouri, he wept profusely.⁹ Even more vivid is her account of Joseph's pacing all through the night in the tiny attic of their home in Palmyra, wringing his hands in anguish over the lost 116 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript. "I besought him not to mourn so," said Lucy,

for perhaps the Lord would forgive him, after a short season of humiliation and repentance. But what could I do to comfort him, when he saw all the family in the same situation of mind as himself; for sobs and groans, and the most bitter lamentations filled the house. However, Joseph was more distressed than the rest, as he better understood the consequences of disobedience. And he continued pacing back and forth, meantime weeping and grieving, until about sunset, when, by persuasion, he took a little nourishment.¹⁰

Such moments of emotional "crescendo," as B. H. Roberts called them,¹¹ toughened both Joseph and Hyrum and helped them to hold on to their faith during later crises.

Emotional Availability

Accounts from the time show that Joseph's days and nights were filled by people coming—often long distances—to "have a word with the Prophet." We know how our Church leaders today are challenged by phone calls, e-mails, and knocks at the door from people needing a moment—seeking advice or requesting a blessing. In Joseph's case, many came seeking not just counsel or encouragement, but literally a revelation, or as they called it, "a commandment." They wanted Joseph to seek the Lord's will about their personal circumstances. Reading these accounts—and knowing we have only a few of them we are struck by Joseph's emotional availability to others. We all know how hard it is to deal with frequent interruptions; Joseph's life, along with Hyrum's, was an endless chain of interruptions.

Hyrum's home was continuously filled with boarders and visitors. For example, Martha Knowlton and her husband, Howard Coray, called upon Hyrum one Sunday in Nauvoo to ask for guidance about a dream Martha had had. When the Corays arrived, Hyrum's home was so packed with visitors there was no chance for private conversation. He invited them to return the next Sunday, only to face another crowd of people. Hyrum pleaded with them to return the following week, but always anxious to help, within a day or two, "he called at the Coray home with a horse and buggy and took the couple for a long carriage ride so that they could finally visit in peace and privacy. The content of Martha's dream is not recorded, but Hyrum's counsel settled her concerns."¹²

The Saints found Hyrum easy to approach with grievances and heartaches. Elder William Young rushed to Hyrum when he and his brother, Alfred, were publicly criticized in the *Times and Seasons* for acting under the influence of an evil spirit while serving as missionaries in Tennessee. This charge was upheld by the Nauvoo high council, which added to the brothers' distress. Hyrum defended them successfully (apparently before the council) and made sure the paper published a statement that the Young brothers had been restored to full fellowship. Hyrum was relentless in making the case for mercy while others were arguing for justice.¹³

Naturally, Joseph tried to teach the Saints to be emotionally self-reliant—and not just to reduce the emotional demands upon the leaders. Perhaps Joseph's most familiar statement on leadership is this: "I teach the people correct principles and they govern themselves."¹⁴ Of course, the Saints did *not* always govern themselves. Although Joseph wanted them to learn resourcefulness and resiliency, they still felt the need for assurance from their prophet.

Most leaders, especially spiritual leaders, face this challenge of giving emotional support to people while encouraging them to become emotionally independent.¹⁵ This kind of tension was high during Zion's Camp when, as George A. Smith recalls, Joseph faced a continuous tide of complaints and criticism. "Even a dog could not bark at some men without their murmuring at Joseph.... Many of us were careless, thoughtless, heedless, foolish or devilish, and yet we did not know it. Joseph had to bear with us and tutor us like children."¹⁶

Managing Emotion

Richard L. Bushman candidly observes of Joseph that he "did not like to be crossed."¹⁷ For a few turbulent months in 1835 in Kirtland, Joseph seemed especially prickly. Anxious about completing the temple, hemmed in by critics, debts, and contention within his own family, Joseph grew impatient and defensive. Those around him differed in their reactions to his anger. "The people around Joseph divided on the degree of suitable indignation, suggesting that cultural norms were in flux."¹⁸ Many expected what they considered perfection in Joseph's every response, even when he was under extreme pressure.

Benjamin Johnson, who held Joseph in reverence, observed that "criticism, even by associates, was rarely acceptable [to Joseph], and contradiction would rouse in him the lion at once, for by no one of his fellows would he be superseded or disputed."¹⁹ Joseph had serious conflicts with his brother William, who had Joseph's intensity but lacked his spirituality and discipline. Joseph and William came to blows on a late December night during the meeting of a debating school at William's house. Soon after, Joseph drew the family together and pleaded with all to be reconciled and restore harmony. In the moment Joseph could be harsh, but he was equally intense in his efforts to repair hurt feelings.²⁰

Time and again, the primary agent behind such reconciliation and healing was gentle Hyrum, who balanced Joseph's intensity and calmed him when emotions ran high. Within two days of the fight between Joseph and William, Hyrum was at Joseph's side, counseling with him and reading a letter of apology from William.²¹ In courts both civil and religious, Hyrum was almost always on the side of forgiveness and long-suffering, sometimes indulging people beyond what Joseph would support. In one dramatic case, Joseph had come to the end of his patience with his counselor, Sidney Rigdon, who had become disloyal and emotionally unstable. Hyrum had often pleaded for Sidney, assuring Joseph that Sidney would "yet straighten out,"²² but in the fall conference of 1843 Joseph openly expressed his frustrations with Sidney and his lack of trust in his integrity. The time had come to decide if Sidney would remain in his calling in the First Presidency.

Hyrum pled for more time for Sidney: "Try him a little longer, try him another year," said Hyrum.²³ But Joseph, though moved to tears by Hyrum's plea, insisted, "The time has now come when we must act upon principle and not upon sympathy. . . . I have carried him on my back long enough, he has stood in my way, and has been no help to me."²⁴ Ultimately, a motion was offered by William Marks, and seconded by Hyrum, to retain Sidney in his calling. At that point, Joseph stunned the conference with his response: "I have thrown him off my shoulders, and you have again put him on me. You may carry him, but I will not."²⁵

Despite Joseph's intensity, he could not bear to be robbed of the Spirit by negative emotions. Typically, he would draw on Hyrum's magnanimity and restraint for help. Despite instances like the Rigdon problem, Joseph was usually open to Hyrum's petitions to bear with others' lapses and even disloyalty. Joseph struggled from the earliest period of his calling to manage emotions that might close the door to revelation. Further, he seemed to understand instinctively, as all great spiritual leaders do, that his own emotions were "viral," that at every moment his heart was on public display and influencing the hearts of others.²⁶

As Robert Solomon and Fernando Flores observe in their insightful exploration of emotional leadership, "We are always in a mood. Moods are our way of being tuned to the world."²⁷ In some cases, the moods of leaders may have more impact than their decisions, as their emotional responses propagate through a vast web of relationships. In another discussion of the "primal force" that leaders' emotions play, Daniel Goleman and his colleagues observe: "Leaders' first task's are the emotional equivalent of good hygiene: getting their own emotions in hand. Quite simply, leaders cannot effectively manage emotions in anyone else without first handling their own. How a leader feels thus becomes more than just a private matter; given the reality of emotional leakage, a leader's emotions have public consequences.²⁸

Joseph's access to the Spirit of the Lord depended heavily on his emotional "tuning," as we can see from his temporary loss of the ability to translate. How long would Joseph have been kept from translating if he had not turned quickly to private prayer and then apologized to Emma? So easily lost, the Spirit is won back in such undramatic ways. In my opinion, these private struggles were Joseph's greatest victories because they made all of his public victories possible. His determination to stay in tune with the Spirit can be seen in his heartfelt apologies to family members and others he offended by his intensity or sharpness in the moment. Joseph knew what was at stake when emotions were set on edge: the loss of spiritual direction. Experienced as he was in receiving spiritual direction, he tutored others through his rapid and heartfelt apologies and forgiveness.

Bushman believes Joseph's emotional life was a product of competing forces: the Yankee culture of honor he grew up in and the revelatory insights he received as a prophet. The "Yankee code" required immediate answers—verbal or physical—to any affront to a man's character or status. "The heart of the culture of honor," says Bushman, "was to do your part but tolerate no implication of inferiority."²⁹ On the other hand, the revelations of God and the adversities he suffered made Joseph more patient and compassionate. Over time, the forces of heaven softened the egotistical demands of honor.

Emotional Intelligence

Organizational scholars have been giving more and more attention lately to the emotional side of leadership—the influence of feelings on performance. These studies focus on emotional intelligence, the ability to understand and manage one's own emotions and those of others. Leaders with emotional intelligence manage themselves and influence others constructively *to achieve positive ends*. Studies show that this emotional competence is revealed in microbehaviors, such as reacting patiently to negative news or responding calmly when challenged in a meeting.³⁰

We also see new interest in "positive" organizational studies growing out of the positive psychology movement. In contrast to abnormal psychology, the study of "negative" human behavior—the downward spirals of neurosis, psychosis, and other emotional malfunctions—positive psychology focuses on "upward spirals"—positive attitudes that lead to peak performance.³¹ Recent research offers provocative evidence that when people are in a positive mood, their ability to solve problems or come up with novel solutions increases.³²

In the case of Joseph Smith, we deal with a man whose emotional life went beyond civility and other typically positive traits; ample evidence from both Mormons and non-Mormons shows that Joseph had remarkable charm, even charisma. If his goal had been self-promotion, he could have been very successful at it. Dale Carnegie's famous self-help guide, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, suggests "six ways to make people like you":

- Become genuinely interested in other people.
- Smile.
- Remember that a man's name is the most important and sweetest sound in the English language.
- Be a good listener.
- Talk in terms of the other man's interest.
- Make the other person feel important—and do it sincerely.

The emotional lives of Joseph and Hyrum went far beyond this kind of perpetual niceness and cheerfulness. The force and frequency of the crises that washed over Joseph and Hyrum called forth emotions of equal magnitude. The figure below is a map of human emotions classed first as positive or negative, then placed in subcategories ranging from extreme anger or enthusiasm to more grayscale emotions like dejection or tranquility. B. H. Roberts's comment that Joseph lived in "crescendo" shows that Joseph spent his life more in the range of highly active emotions than in the grayscale emotions.



Adapted from Randy J. Larsen and Edward Diener, "Promises Problems with the Circumflex Model of Emotion," Review of Personality and Social Psychology 13 (1992): 31.

In looking back at Joseph's life, we might easily mistake his emotional character as merely cheerful; but the spectrum of his emotions went far beyond "being nice." Christina Kotchemidova, an astute observer of the social history of emotions, claims that as American society passed from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, the unexciting emotion of cheerfulness became the "main emotional norm" of our age and is now "the most favored emotion for experience and display."³³ Today we expect cheerfulness from our leaders—as well as from retail clerks, physicians, teachers, and parents. As the acceptable emotional "norm," cheerfulness has come to exert a kind of tyranny over other emotions that might be just as vital to successful performance of our work.

Cheerfulness is a moderate and moderating emotion, down on the less intense side of a continuum of more intense emotions such as excitement, zeal, thrill, and exhilaration. Cheerfulness speeds things up in most transactions and calms extreme feelings that might cause discomfort. Most of the time, in most places, cheerfulness is a highly productive and "low-cost" emotion.

But Joseph, and those who stood with him, were painted from a broader palette of expression and feeling. Their mission was not simply to grease the wheels of society, but to draw the minds and spirits of men and women toward heaven. It is easier to preserve harmony than to challenge people to excellence and sacrifice, and it is easier to commend people than to reprove them. "I frequently rebuke and admonish my brethren," said Joseph, "and that because I love them, not because I wish to incur their displeasure, or mar their happiness, ... but these rebukes and admonitions become necessary, from the perverseness of the brethren, for their temporal as well as spiritual welfare. They actually constitute a part of the duties of my station and calling."³⁴

We can easily make the mistake of judging Joseph, and our present leaders both religious and secular, by how "nice" they are, rather than by how effectively they respond to the emotional demands of the situation. Again, in light of the broad "bandwidth" of Joseph's emotional life, we see that he was often stretched by spiritual pressures most people never feel. Joseph was emotionally and spiritually attuned not only to people but also to his surroundings, as in this striking instance: "About nine o'clock, while I was riding in a wagon with Brother Hyrum, Ezra Thayer and George A. Smith, we came into a piece of thick woods of recent growth, where I told them that I felt much depressed in spirit and lonesome, and that there had been a great deal of bloodshed in that place, remarking that whenever a man of God is in a place where many have been killed, he will feel lonesome and unpleasant, and his spirits will sink. "³⁵

Coping with "Boundary Moments"

Joseph had an unusual ability to cope with what my colleague Curtis LeBaron calls "boundary moments"—those hard moments in dealing with other people that require sudden emotional shifts. Joseph faced these boundary moments virtually every day. He had to move from responding *as a man* in one moment to responding *as a prophet* in the next. We recall his familiar caution that a prophet is a prophet only when acting as one;³⁶ however, Joseph was often called upon to act as a prophet with little time to prepare.

At such times he first had to marshal his own moods and feelings to call up the faith and energy required to draw upon the power of inspiration. Then he had to communicate his inspired feelings in ways others could understand. Joseph became a consummate master of making such boundary crossings. We read that occasionally he would pause to shift into a spiritual frame of mind, inviting the power of revelation through prayer and momentary silence. Boundary moments like these can easily throw a leader off balance, and they came at Joseph Smith randomly and in thickets. For instance, Joseph Taylor—John Taylor's brother—sought out Joseph one day in 1841. According to reports, John was being held in prison in Missouri, and the distraught Taylor family wanted to know if Joseph Smith could shed prophetic light on John's fate.

As the Prophet Joseph only lived about three miles from our house I got on a horse and rode to his home. When I reached there, Sister Emma Smith said that he and his son Joseph had just gone up the river near Nauvoo to shoot ducks. I rode up to them, when the Prophet inquired about my mother's welfare. I told him that Mother was very sad and downhearted about the safety of her son John; and she had requested me to come and ask him as a man of God whether my brother would ever return home.

He rested on his gun, and bent his head for a moment as if in prayer or deep reflection. Then, with a beautiful beaming countenance, full of smiles, he looked up and told me to go and tell Mother that her son would return in safety inside of a week. True to the word of the Prophet, he got home in six days after this occurrence. This was a great comfort to Mother for her son had been absent for about six months.³⁷

Another such "boundary moment" occurred when Ebenezer Robinson, a Nauvoo printer, suddenly felt inspired to produce another edition of the Book of Mormon. Ebenezer said of this revelation: "It seemed that a ball of fire came down from above and striking the top of my head passed down into my heart." Later, when Joseph walked into the printing office, Ebenezer told him that if he, Joseph, could secure two-hundred dollars, he would put in another two-hundred dollars himself and print two thousand more copies of the Book of Mormon. Ebenezer recalls: "[Joseph] dropped his face into his hand for a minute or so, when he said, 'I will do it.' He then asked how soon we would want the money. I replied in two weeks."³⁸

Joseph had enough emotional confidence to coach others in dealing with these "boundary moments." When his tempestuous and troubled brother William pleaded to be released from the Quorum of the Twelve after a fight with Joseph, Joseph pushed for William to stay at his post and deny the devil the advantage by choosing to retreat. "This is the stratagem of the evil one; when he has gained one advantage, he lays a plan for another. . . . When a man falls one step, he must regain that step again, or fall another; he has still more to gain, or eventually all is lost."³⁹

Emotional and Spiritual Balance

Balancing emotions with the demands of the spiritual life is a constant challenge to religious leaders. Too little emotion, especially what we call positive "sentiments," and the heart becomes indifferent and apathy takes control.⁴⁰ Too much emotion, and the heart leads us beyond the boundaries of genuine inspiration and stable judgment. "Enthusiasm," which literally means to be possessed of God, was historically used as a negative term for the kind of counterfeit inspiration that leads people away from the guidance of scripture and toward the guidance of bogus dreams, visions, reveries, and revelations.⁴¹

Joseph understood that emotional health was vital to spiritual health; he also knew that untethered emotions can boil up into frenzy and expose us to spiritual manipulation. He cautioned the Saints to beware of "a fanciful and flowery and heated imagination . . . because the things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out."⁴²

Religious leaders in every age have had to face counterfeit or overzealous demonstrations of religious passion among their own congregants. This confrontation is one of the acid tests of a leader's wisdom and inspiration. Such tests faced John Wesley, the eighteenth-century founder of Methodism, as well as Jonathan Edwards, his contemporary American Puritan minister and theologian. The emotionalism of the Methodist services, including heartfelt testimonials and camp meetings, created tremendous emotional energy in Wesley, but he recognized that emotionalism and spirituality were not the same. Among the solid and earnest worshippers were some who were unbalanced emotionally or misdirected in their exuberance.⁴³

Wesley's most unnerving challenge in this regard was a man named George Bell, a former soldier who became an itinerant Methodist preacher in London in the 1750s and brought thousands of people under his hypnotic influence. Bell's enthusiasm apparently ran away with itself. He eventually began prophesying the destruction of London and the impending end of the world. His false prophetic date was set at February 28, 1763. Despite years of prayerful and devoted ministry and experience, Wesley was uncertain how to handle the loose cannon that was Bell. David Hempton, a historian of Methodism, says that Wesley was unsure how to deal with the emotionality of religious conversion. Hempton suggests that Wesley would have done well to impose limits and discipline much sooner on such preachers as Bell. By the time Wesley acted, much damage had been done to the Methodist movement in London.44

Jonathan Edwards was a leader in the first Great Awakening that swept through the Connecticut Valley in the 1740s. The awakening was stirred by genuine spiritual longing and extreme emotionalism; at times, ministers could not finish their sermons because of the screaming, moaning, and fainting. Itinerant preachers crisscrossed the Connecticut Valley, whipping people into frenzy with their preaching. George Marsden describes the fervor: "Revival sermons now were typically punctuated by outcries of anguish or of joy, or by convulsions, rages, seizures, and faintings. Sometimes preachers could not continue until the ecstatic were carried off. For a time during this great awakening, unprecedented in its scope and intensity, it seemed as though all New England were seized with spiritual hysteria. Often it was wonderful, often terrifying."⁴⁵

Edwards, who longed to see his fellow Christians stirred from apathy, also cautioned people against hysteria and the tendency to "enthusiasm." He worked hard both to fuel the fire and quell its excesses. In his journal Edwards wrote, "A great deal of caution and pains . . . were found necessary to keep the people, many of them, from running wild."⁴⁶

Discerning Emotionalism from Spirituality

When does genuine religious feeling morph into emotional or even spiritual sickness—and when and how does one know when that line is being crossed? The gift of discernment is never more needed than at such times.

Joseph's gift of discernment was tested early in the Kirtland period. The details are well known. In 1831, reports starting coming to Joseph that some converts in Kirtland were claiming revelations for the whole Church; others were indulging in the same excessive behavior that had troubled Wesley and Edwards. Milton V. Backman Jr. tactfully describes this behavior: "Some of the early converts to the restored Church expressed their convictions by engaging in spiritual exercises and were reported to have been seen falling to the ground and sliding around 'like serpents.' Others, it was reported, would jump, leap, and wave their arms as though they were engaged in a scalping exercise, run into the fields, climb on tree stumps, and commence preaching as though they were surrounded by a large congregation, seemingly oblivious to reality."⁴⁷

The outlandish behavior of some members fueled the prejudice and fears of non-Mormons in Ohio. Unchecked, this problem might have quashed missionary efforts in the entire region. Once aware of the emerging crisis, Joseph moved quickly to seek inspiration and respond. A revelation given in May 1831 taught the Saints that "that which doth not edify is not of God" (D&C 50:23).

Joseph's directions to the Saints on the testing and discerning of spirits is profound, and though not often discussed today, the significance of this counsel will no doubt resurface in an age more and more characterized by emotional excess. His warnings are timeless: not all spiritual power is from God and not all instances of deep feeling and intense emotion are inspired.

Notes

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- 5. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 268.
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- 20. Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, 299-302.
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