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Title Acquiring and Preserving Written Records: A Sacred Commission

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Abstract This article discusses the importance of recording sacred experiences and preserving other written records.

ACQUIRING AND PRESERVING WRITTEN RECORDS: A SACRED COMMISSION

John Murphy

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe that righteous men and women can receive inspiration and revelation from a loving and omniscient Heavenly Father. Revelation is sacred, and although Latter-day Saints are counseled to maintain the sanctity of personal revelatory experience, they are also encouraged to preserve their sacred experiences in personal records.

For the Latter-day Saint faithful, the written word—including their scriptures but also their journals, diaries, correspondence, and even the more mundane business ledger or e-mail message—is a mediating space where the sacred and the profane may meet. The blank page or tablet has always been a place of unlimited potential and literary opportunity. The blank page also represents a dialogical space where the faithful can talk to God. In other words, the blank page can be transformed into holy text for an individual, a family member, or the larger community of Saints. It is on paper and in prayer that the righteous converse with their Creator. It is on paper that the faithful document their travails and sorrows as well as their joys and successes. And it is on paper that the righteous convey or relate their experiences to future generations.

Revelation in tandem with the written record provides historical and spiritual memory and hence the thread of continuity that preserves the past, thereby guaranteeing the longevity of a righteous community. The preservation of texts is therefore a sacred and holy task.

In the ancient world, for example, record keepers who created and preserved texts were often priests who carried out their sacred work in temples and holy sanctuaries. Temples have always represented that sacred ground where heaven meets earth, and it is no accident that both ancient and modern manuscript repositories and libraries have often been associated with churches and other sacred places.

Although manuscript curators and librarians are not necessarily priests in the Latter-day Saint tradition, their role in appraising, acquiring, processing, preserving, and making records accessible is a vital one. Because the Saints value sacred revelatory experience and thus cherish historical experience and knowledge, manuscript repositories can and do play central roles in the Latter-day Saint spiritual and historical tradition. This explains their enormous and expensive efforts to preserve as full a record of the past as possible. For example, because Brigham Young University is sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and because the L. Tom Perry Special Collections is a central element within that university system, manuscript curators employed by BYU are expected to meet the highest professional standards in their work. Their task to document the historical experiences of Latter-day Saints is a sacred one. Another sacred aspect of their work is to document all human activity that flows from or has a potential impact on the faith of the Saints (see Doctrine and Covenants 123, which provides a justification for collecting and preserving, among other things, the “libelous publications” [v. 4] of their enemies).

The Saints value land and landscape, tolerance and diversity, faithful scholarship and learning, and creativity. They seek a “knowledge of history, and of countries, and of kingdoms, of laws of God and man” (D&C 93:53), and they “seek after” that which is “virtuous, lovely, or of good report” (Articles of Faith 1:13). To the extent possible, the Saints must assemble and preserve a full record of all these things, and they must maintain a true and sacred record of both human activity and God’s dealings with his children.

This professional activity is in harmony with BYU’s stated mission to “assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life.”

So it is not surprising that the university’s mission statement highlights the idea that “the gospel encourages the pursuit of all truth.” Consequently, “students at BYU should receive a broad university education. The arts, letters, and sciences provide the core of such an education, which will help students think clearly, communicate effectively, understand important ideas in their own cultural tradition as well as that of others, and establish clear standards of intellectual integrity.” Written records, particularly those we designate “primary sources,” are vital to a “broad university education.”¹ They are also important for the community of Saints.

By having access to the unmediated and unedited words of their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, to the thoughts, words, and wisdom of their spiritual and intellectual forebears, and to the greatest thought that their people have had to offer, the Saints will come to “think clearly” and will be assisted in understanding the vital role of revelation and the written record in developing and perpetuating a Zion community.

As we come to terms with our historic past and learn to love and appreciate those who sacrificed and suffered so that we might grow and develop, we in turn will see prophecy and ancient revelation fulfilled as the “hearts of the children . . . turn to their fathers” (Joseph Smith—History 1:39; see Malachi 4:6; D&C 110:15; 128:17). We will also be led to look to the future with faith and hope.

1. “BYU Mission Statement,” found at unicomm.byu.edu/president/missionstatement.aspx (accessed 28 November 2007).