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‘‘Uncle Spencer’’: 1944–1985

Stanley B. Kimball

By the summer of 1944, I was seventeen years old, living in Denver, owned a car, and had literally and figuratively taken over the running of my life. I was also cornering into the wrong turn at the crossroads of maturing puberty.

The preceding October, Spencer W. Kimball, from Arizona, had been called as an Apostle by President Heber J. Grant. During that same summer of 1944, I visited relatives in my native state of Utah, where my grandmother informed me that she was a one-half first cousin to the new General Authority, making me a one-half first cousin twice removed. That was all the excuse I needed to try to secure an appointment with Elder Kimball.

In his office that July, I noticed he was deep into family genealogy. Fortunately for me, he mentioned a little problem he had with the line of one of his uncles, Abraham Alonzo Kimball, who just happened to be my great-grandfather—and, more to the point, the father of the grandmother who had raised me. Sensing an opportunity, I exuberantly announced that my grandmother knew all about that line and promptly called her on the phone and obtained the needed data.

During my appointment that day, I felt very awkward in addressing my distant cousin. I tried ‘‘Elder,’’ ‘‘Brother,’’ even ‘‘Apostle.’’ Noting my confusion, Elder Kimball said, ‘‘Stan, you really should not call me by the sacred title of Apostle. How would you like to call me *Uncle*?’’ Since I had never known my father, and since my mother’s brothers were very dear to me, I was overjoyed to be permitted to use this very special term, to even approximate such a relationship. And so this wonderful man immediately became ‘‘Uncle Spencer.’’ In subsequent years he more than lived up to this title, generously and kindly giving me counsel and help at many important crossways.

When I visited him in his office again later that summer, he asked me—offhandedly, it seemed—if I would like to take a walk. Surprised that he could spare that kind of time in a busy day, I quickly accepted. We walked up to the east wall of the temple, so close I could

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have touched it had I felt worthy to do so. Next we visited the grave of Heber C. Kimball, his grandfather and my great-great-grandfather, behind the Kimball Apartments on North Main Street. Back in his office, I felt impelled to tell him my problems. I vaguely realized he had sensed something was wrong and had taken me on this little walk to try to get me to confide in him. When I left him, he had relieved me of my personal burden. I experienced “the miracle of forgiveness” long before he wrote the book. I have spent forty years trying to honor what he did for me that day.

During the summer of 1946, my mother and I sailed to Hawaii on the *Matsonia* and discovered that the Kimballs and Elder and Sister Matthew Cowley were aboard on assignment to the islands. As we separated to our hotels in Honolulu, “Uncle Spencer” noted our phone number. Thereafter, my mother and I were graciously invited to every special occasion the Hawaiian Saints provided for the visiting General Authorities, one of which was a singular luau the like of which tourists never see. One day the phone rang, and I found myself invited to join Elders Kimball and Cowley and the Hawaiian mission president on a charter flight to the leper settlement on the nearly inaccessible Makenalua Peninsula of the island of Molokai. This experience was intensely emotional for me, and while I remember most of it only as a blur, one thing I will never forget. We had come to hold a conference with the Saints from various South Pacific islands who were confined there. Partway through the services, a choir sang “We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet” in Hawaiian. During the hymn, the mission president asked me to look closely at the necks of the choir members. I did so and observed in many cases tubes sticking out of scarves. Leprosy had destroyed their throats to such an extent that they could only breathe through these tubes. Somehow they had learned to sing in that fashion just for this special event. In trying to hold back tears, I got a blinding headache and, when called upon to say a few words, could only mumble briefly and sit down.

When I returned from my mission in 1951, “Uncle Spencer” gave me counsel about a career (“Go East and amount to something before returning to Utah”) and about marriage (“There is no ‘one and only’; there are no matches ‘made in heaven’”).

In 1963 I was again in Utah, this time with a family, visiting my mother. At this time, “Uncle Spencer” perceived I was having trouble in the role of the married only child of a divorced and possessive mother. He cared enough to take the time and effort to tell me what I had to do and to give me the courage to bring this three-way relationship into proper balance—a painful task I could never have attempted without his imperative, “You must do it.”

“Uncle Spencer” was supportive for the more than ten years it took me to complete my biography of Heber C. Kimball. One day in July 1973, while I was in Utah on a research trip, he mentioned that he had collected many original family papers which I might find useful in my research. About midmorning on the Fourth, a few days before I had to return to St. Louis, the phone rang. “Stan, I am free for a short while; can you come right up?” I said, “Of course,” and quickly left my apartment on Third East Street near Fourth South. On Fourth South, my Buick sputtered to a halt, and my limited knowledge of mechanics proved inadequate to the crisis. As I bent under the upraised hood—no buses, no taxis, hardly anyone around, and my valuable appointment time running out—I may have half-thought a prayer. I don’t remember. What I do recall is the squeal of tires right behind me. A man stepped out and voiced the usual trite, but quite appropriate question, “Having trouble?” “Yes, damn it,” I growled and explained my predicament. He took a look, freed my carburetor float, and the engine roared back to life.

I took a moment to thank him and jokingly asked if he were one of the Three Nephites. He was not. He operated his own garage. I asked what led him to stop and help me in the middle of a deserted downtown on a holiday and was rewarded with a nice story. He had been stationed at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, during World War II and was treated so well by some Mormons when he came into St. Louis on leave that he had promised himself to return the favor if he ever had an opportunity to help someone from Missouri. (He had noticed my license plate.) I thanked him again, shook his hand, and hurried off, just a little late for my appointment.

An hour or so later, “Uncle Spencer” had transferred to me a pile of Kimball family documents about ten inches high which eventually helped fill in many lacunae in the life of our mutual ancestor. With his permission, I secured photocopies of the documents, and the originals were then turned over to the Historical Department of the Church.

The research for the biography continued, and on 11 December 1975 President Kimball wrote me the following advice:

I hope sincerely that you will not be influenced unduly by those who claim to be true historians and in order to become true historians must tell all of the questionable and improper things in a person’s life. . . .

I sincerely hope, Stan, that before the larger work goes to press that you analyze it very carefully to be sure there is no good work prostituted to pay tribute to the god of what is thought to be true historian ethics or standards. . . .

Please rest assured that I have great confidence in you in not only your ability but your integrity, and I hope you will take no offense at this suggestion.

Faithfully yours,
Uncle Spencer

“Uncle Spencer” visited our stake in St. Louis in 1961, 1970, 1977, 1978, and 1980. On one of these occasions, I was able to make a token repayment for his many kindnesses to me. When he came on 1–2 July 1978 to dedicate our stake center, we made much of the visit, for we discovered that this was the first time a President of the Church had returned to his former mission field to dedicate a chapel built by the Saints. We located, through an old-time member of the stake, a 1915 photograph of the missionaries in the East Missouri Conference of the Central States Mission, of which Elder Kimball had been conference president. We had previously determined that President Kimball no longer had this photograph, so we presented him with a framed copy. We also arranged a brief reunion with three sisters who still remembered President Kimball as a missionary in St. Louis sixty-two years previously, and we took him on a tour of some of his old mission haunts. First we went to 4260 Easton Avenue, where the Saints held their services in a converted meat market in 1915. Then we took him to 5195 Maple Avenue, where, as one of his last duties as a missionary, he had arranged the purchase, for \$6,500, of a vacant building for the Church’s use. Finally, we presented him with a framed map of St. Louis on which we had marked as many sites connected with his mission as we could determine. He was very pleased with all of this.

Three years later, on Friday afternoon, 12 June 1981, I was able to present him with the first copy off the press of *Heber C. Kimball: Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer* and to thank him again for his support, for the use of his personal collection of documents, and for what he had meant to me for nearly forty years.

Although I saw “Uncle Spencer” only irregularly and was certainly never “family,” we corresponded fairly steadily between 19 March 1947 and 20 May 1982. In rereading these communications, I see that we discussed all sorts of personal, professional, and doctrinal matters. I note with surprise that he actually read and commented on all of my publications which I rather presumptuously sent him. Occasionally he even made corrections in my manuscripts. Bless his heart, once he even apologized to me for having been late in responding!

Out of all these letters, two passages mean the most to me. On 8 May 1953 he wrote:

Uncle Spencer

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It is most distressing to me to be under the necessity of advising you that special assignments given to me will have me in Central Montana through the week of June 22nd to June 28th, inclusive. I have tried in every way I can to shift and adjust, but it seems impossible. And so it looks as though it would be impossible for me to take care of your marriage on Thursday, June 25th. This is surely disappointing to me, not only to be unable to favor you, but also it might mean that I would miss you.

The other passage comes from a letter of 14 February 1948: "Though I placed your picture with those of my sons on my desk, where I could be quite near you, it has occurred to me that I may have failed to express in my last letter my thanks for it."

How does one say how much one loves such a man and how much one will miss him?