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## Spencer W. Kimball: A Man of Good Humor

Edward L. Kimball

When Spencer W. Kimball had been President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for five years, he said of his heavy responsibility, "It helps . . . if you can see the fun in things and not take [them] too seriously."<sup>1</sup> Though most would count it only a minor aspect of his character, President Kimball's genial personality and warm sense of humor proved invaluable to him. When he worked, no one worked harder; when it was time to relax, he had the ability to let go. In the midst of heavy stake conference responsibilities, he could find a quiet place to lie on the floor and nap for a few minutes, waking refreshed. And his quick wit, most often turned on himself, helped make the wheels turn more smoothly.

Good spirits were the norm for Spencer Kimball. Though he had a few morose periods in his life, he also had the capacity to will them away. He reports several instances of having made a conscious decision to change. For example, when his beloved sister Ruth died while he was on his mission, he had to make a conscious effort to stop grieving and turn back to his work. During hard times early in marriage, when Camilla was ill, he felt somewhat depressed but again he decided that he needed to take control of his feelings. And during the economic depression of the 1930s, the young businessman wrote to friends, "I'm still trying to be cheerful but it is not so easy." "It is hard to keep optimistic. After a good night's rest I rush down to work all pepped up and ready for anything. . . . And by night time you feel everything is gone to the bad. But while conditions are certainly at a low ebb, and prospects look mighty gloomy and unfavorable, yet so far we have not actually been stinted in food, so we feel mighty thankful for that." "Business is offfff, as you know; we are still hanging onnnn."<sup>2</sup>

Later bouts with illness clouded his view temporarily, but he managed with humor to brush away the clouds.

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Edward L. Kimball is Ernest L. Wilkinson Professor of Law at Brigham Young University.

Spencer Kimball had no immunity against annoyance or anger, but outbursts were few. His daughter, Olive Beth, recalls his growling at her for walking around the house wearing his hats—on her feet. He once slapped a book out of her hands when she responded to her mother's request for help in the kitchen with "in a minute." I saw him kick the cow once when she put her foot in the bucket for the third time, and heard him say "Damn!" when he hit his head on the corner of the cupboard. These occasions were memorable partly because they were so rare.

Spencer Kimball's even temperament was not a facade put up to meet people's expectations of a General Authority; he was much the same in public as in private.

As a boy and young man he loved fun and practical jokes, some of which later embarrassed him a bit in light of his serious calling. But his youthful high jinks serve to remind us that prophets are not born to position. Spencer served as president of his high school class each year. When they graduated, instead of something useful, his class had the whimsy to present to the school as the class gift a pillar to stand in front of the building bearing the names of all twenty-one graduates cut in the stone. During his young married years, his group of friends had a repertoire of practical jokes they would play on one another, especially on New Year's Eve. They would telephone to wake up absent friends, sometimes long distance—always collect! They called one friend, asking, "Is this Mrs. Fuller?" "Yes." "Do you wash?" (meaning, in those days, "Do you wash clothes for others?") "No, of course I don't wash." "You certainly must be dirty by now." Or there was their annual call to Lee John: "Is this Mr. John?" "Yes." "Do you live on the highway to Solomonville?" "Yes." "Well, you'd better get off because there's a car coming down the highway like a bat out of hell."

One New Year's Eve the group went to the home of a couple who had left the party early, and, when no one would answer the door, the invaders got in through a window. They found the wife in bed hiding under her blanket but discovered that the husband had crawled under the bed to escape them. The men just lifted the whole bed straight up, to the dismay of their friend huddled shivering on the floor in his underwear. Another New Year's Eve the group of rowdies phoned Jay Green, who owned a clothing store, with the story that a girl needed a wedding dress that night because she was leaving on the next bus. He got out of bed to open the store and be greeted by a raucous "Happy New Year." It was more like April Fools' Day with a kind of rural pranksterism.

The joking did not confine itself to New Year's. At Indian Hot Springs, Spencer and Jesse Udall got out of the pool before college



president Harvey Taylor did, and they hid Harvey's clothes. All he found when he went to dress was a blanket, a large safety pin, and a note telling him to pin on the blanket and come out for lunch.

After Spencer became an Apostle, he asked his friends not to tell about all the old pranks from his younger years, but they were more reliable in keeping silence than he was. He would later wryly recount to his family stories of youthful mischief and personal misadventures—of making rotten egg gas in high school chemistry, resulting in the school's having to be dismissed for the day; getting expelled from high school briefly when he induced nearly all the boys to skip school on April Fools' Day; accidentally shooting off his rifle at the wrong time in military training; sitting down on his own straw boater at church; or mistaking the Utah state mental hospital for Brigham Young University. While he seemed not to be particularly proud of such events as these, they did represent a little spice in a generally "proper" life.

Spencer tended to be the center of any group. In his Arizona days, his circles of business and Church friends knew him as "the life of the party." They remember his ready laugh, his playing the piano for group singing, his love of games. Said one, "He always kept us laughing. I don't believe I've ever heard a laugh that was so musical." A fellow Rotarian once said Spencer could have a better time sober than others could drunk. When he and Camilla received word of the birth of their first grandchild, the two of them went around to all their friends' homes to announce the event, dressed up with shawls and hobbling with the aid of canes.

His relationship with Camilla was excellent, but not without occasional minor differences. At a golden wedding anniversary party for another couple, when a speaker said that the couple had never raised their voices at one another, Spencer leaned over and whispered to a friend, "It must have been dull."

Even as an Apostle he was willing to inject fun into a usually staid occasion. In 1946 Elder Kimball was chairman of a quarterly social for General Authorities and their wives. He organized a quartet consisting of himself and Elders Benson, Petersen, and Cowley, with Harold B. Lee at the piano. He had them learn a comic song about Herpicide, a sure cure for baldness. At the party, the quartet seated LeGrand Richards and Milton R. Hunter in front of them and rubbed tonic on the two men's bald heads as they sang. Then they put a towel wrapped like a turban on each man. At the end of the song, they unwrapped the towels to disclose a red fright wig on one and a wig of barrister curls on the other.

Spencer had friends among all groups and ages. He loved people. In Arizona, when he called on "Grandma" Craig, an elderly woman, he would always pretend to be the Fuller Brush man. Years later, when



she was on her deathbed and he came to say good-bye, she showed no recognition until he mentioned Fuller brushes. Then she smiled and pressed his hand.

As he traveled to stake conferences, he would help with the milking, play the piano and sing with the children, and shake hands with all comers. As President he attended huge area conferences with crowds impossibly large to greet individually, but he still wanted to. He said, "I milked cows the first half of my life so that I could shake hands the other half."

At home, Spencer was no less good-humored. He claimed that as a suitor he ate at the Eyring table so regularly that "Father Eyring gave his consent to our marrying just to get rid of me." He could be a tease, seeing things that weren't there or failing to see things in plain view. He would say to one of his little children, "I see you are in the newspaper!" "Where? Where?" "It says right here, 'Crowd of Thousands Watches Parade.'" Or he would be unable to see his daughter's Christmas gift from her boyfriend until everything else had been distributed from under the tree.

In contrast, Spencer's humor rarely showed through when he spoke in public. His talks and sermons tended to be straightforward, without much evidence of his ready wit. Indeed, many people perceived him as severe because of this and because of his frequent crying of the need for repentance. Only occasionally was there a mild jest in his talks.<sup>3</sup> At one stake conference he arrived for the meetings only to discover that he was wearing brown stockings with a blue suit. The stake president's wife brought him a pair of her husband's blue socks. Elder Kimball then announced to the congregation, "I'm not filling the stake president's shoes this morning, but I am filling his socks."

Spencer Kimball did not joke about the gospel, even in private; that was serious. About as near as he came to making light of Church matters was his urging his friend Jesse Udall to attend general conference when he was first sustained "so I will be sure to get a few votes."

A person in a position of high responsibility needs to distinguish between himself and his position. Many do not; Spencer Kimball always did. He maintained perspective, neither puffing himself up nor belittling his office. After five years as the President of the Church, he said, "I still wonder what was the Lord thinking about, making a little country boy like me [President of his church], unless he knew that I didn't have any sense and would just keep on working."<sup>4</sup> Stories he told often bore the message: Don't try to make me something more than I am. He delighted in telling about the aftermath of his call as an Apostle. He had gone from Arizona, where he lived, to Salt Lake City to confer with the First Presidency. While he was there the news



of his call was released, and when he returned to Arizona to sell his business and home and to move his family to Utah the news had run before him. His friends made it difficult for him to get any work done, for they streamed into his office to offer congratulations and express their view of how right it was that he had been called, and how inevitable. They had “known” that something of that sort was sure to happen. Then Evans Coleman came in, a cowpuncher type who had known Spencer Kimball as a boy. He asked, “Spencer, can I talk with you?” Of course he could. They sat down, and in the conversation Evans said, “So you’re going to Salt Lake to be one of the Twelve Apostles, are you?” “Yes, Evans, that’s so.” “Well, it’s clear that the Lord must have called you—because no one else would have thought of you!” The quip is Evans Coleman’s, but Spencer Kimball’s telling the story with relish says something important about the storyteller.

After his call, he had to take his leave of the stake over which he presided. He found the adulatory treatment awkward and in a letter to his wife wrote: “We went up early yesterday morning to Franklin for Sunday School and testimony meeting, then to Duncan for testimony meeting at 12:30, then up to Virden for 2:30 meeting. All the meetings started out as testimony meetings regular and ended in testimonials for me. I told the boys as we went late to the last two meetings that I was the first corpse I had ever seen that had three funerals in one day and was late for two of them. I needed only pallbearers and an open grave to make it complete.”

Elder Kimball found humor in his treatment as a new, and therefore relatively unknown, General Authority and liked to tell what happened. Soon after he began visiting stake conferences, someone came up after a meeting and said, “You know, Elder Lee, I was glad you came to visit our stake, because I keep getting you confused with Brother Richards.” One day a Primary teacher brought her class to the Church Office Building, obviously having primed them from photographs of General Authorities to associate faces and names. The children filed into Elder Kimball’s office, and the teacher asked expectantly, “Which one of you knows who this man is?” After a long, embarrassing silence, one little fellow, scratching his head, said, “I know I’ve seen that mug somewhere.”

In Arizona, where he was known, his experience was just the opposite. He visited Safford the year after his call as an Apostle and found that so many friends crowded around he could not finish his business. He wrote home, “[Our friend] has already hugged and kissed me so much since I came I do not know if I can go through it again. He came up right in conference before hundreds of people and threw his arms around me and kissed me. I think I blushed. I may have to wear a mask.”



Spencer Kimball's awareness of his limitations and foibles produced jests about them. At maximum height he was five feet six, though he grew shorter with age. He said, of his long trunk and stubby legs, "I am a Woolley. I sit tall, but I stand short." Or, "It is my brothers' fault. They made me carry so much swill to the hogs in those five-gallon honey cans that it stunted my growth." In a letter home from a Syracuse hotel he wrote, "Yesterday as we got in the elevator to come down, two little midgets came down with us. I certainly got a lift when I, the scrubbiest of the scrubby, could look far down on grown men so much smaller than I. I frequently find men thinner, but seldom find them shorter."

Returning from an area conference in St. Louis on the same plane as President Kimball, Elder Ronald Poelman got up to stroll in the aisle. The President caught his arm and asked, "Where are you going?" "I was just stretching my legs," came the explanation. "You don't need to do that; they're long enough already. It's little people like me who need to stretch their legs."

Nicholas Udall, Spencer's nephew, looks a good deal like him. Once in the Church Office Building a stranger mistook Nick for his uncle. When Nick reported that, Spencer asked, "Were you embarrassed?"

A few times in his life President Kimball helped in the kitchen. One day the next-door neighbor came in while he was drying the dishes and President Kimball, acknowledging the novelty of the situation, said, "Saundra, I want you to be sure to write in your journal that I did the dishes for Camilla."

He tried to downplay some incidents which might have been overinterpreted. The story of his slipping off the hay wagon to run to Primary when his older brothers said he couldn't go has been used often as proof of his faithfulness. "I've always gotten lots of credit from people for being a very good Primary boy. . . . I was a great kid to get out of work." He decided against taking up an option on some property on the Las Vegas "Strip" because he did not want to tie himself to the gambling town and also because he did not know the full value of the option until later, but he told the incident with a light touch: "It is good we didn't buy that property. We'd unavoidably have been multimillionaires and I don't think I could have stood it."

His attitude toward the older General Authorities tended to be almost worshipful. With those nearer his age or younger, his relationships were affectionate, occasionally playful and even teasing, as in the "Herpicide" incident. On one occasion he and Bruce R. McConkie were in Mexico City to visit the mission. Because of the oppressive heat they took off their coats during a break between meetings. When the time came to go back in, Elder Kimball picked up and put on Elder



McConkie's coat, which hung down past his hands, and Elder McConkie pulled on the small coat, which came just to his forearms, as the missionaries raced for their cameras. Later, at Oaxaca, a guide showed the two men a round column and told them the folklore that, if a man reached his arms around the column the number of finger widths left between his hands was the number of years he had still to live. Elder Kimball found that by that standard he had sixteen years left. Elder McConkie, with his long arms, circled the column and overlapped a little. "That," said Elder Kimball, "means that you are already dead and don't know it."

The First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve ordinarily meet in the Salt Lake Temple each week to conduct the business of the Church and often have lunch together. For years it was the practice to pass a box of Cummings chocolates around after lunch, beginning with the First Presidency. By the time the box got to the newest member of the Twelve, at the end of the line, the pieces of candy with light chocolate were always gone. On one occasion—after President Kimball asked, "Is there any further business?"—the junior member said, "Is there any chance to reverse the usual order of choosing chocolates? I don't care for dark chocolate and that is all there is left by the time the box gets to me." President Kimball replied, "If you live long enough, you'll move up into the light chocolates."

Once the President invited two of the Twelve into his office to give them an assignment. President Tanner said, "I can't think of two finer men for this job." One of them urged modestly, "Surely you can do better than us." The President countered with, "Would you mind going ahead while we are looking for two better men?"

In a general conference session, President Kimball announced that Marion G. Romney would be the next speaker, mistakenly identifying him as his First Counselor. President Romney whispered, "You've just promoted me." President Kimball responded, teasingly, "I'm sorry."

One of the hardest things is to continue cheerful when you feel ill. Elder Kimball was generally able to retain a sense of humor even under these circumstances and thereby lift both his own spirits and others'. In 1957, he underwent serious surgery for the removal of cancerous vocal cords. Shortly before the operation, during a district conference, the mission leader introduced Elder Kimball in glowing terms, told of the imminent surgery, and said solemnly, "We may never again be privileged to hear his voice of counsel." Gloom settled over the congregation until Elder Kimball arose to speak and said, "I shall tell the Brethren that when I die it will not be necessary to have a funeral, since I've already had a funeral in Portland." In the ensuing laughter all sadness dissipated.



After the operation he suffered a great deal of pain and sleeplessness. He complained in a letter, "Insomnia is my trouble. Why, I couldn't even doze in sacrament meeting yesterday." To the doctor who operated he wrote a note asking why his tongue was so painful. "We stepped on it," was the reply. "Yes," Spencer wrote, "and with hobnail boots." For a long time during recovery he was told not to try to speak. Still he carried on his work as best he could by writing. He would interview people or carry on a conversation by typing out his part while they responded orally. He reported delightedly that one of the men in the Church Office Building who came to his office engaged in such a discussion with obvious, growing frustration. Finally the man said, "I've dealt before with people who were deaf and dumb, but I've never dealt with anyone who was just plain dumb."

Talking with people was central to Spencer Kimball's life and work, and this period of silence was very difficult for him. A nephew, talking about frustrating dreams, asked, "Have you ever been in a dream and tried to scream, but just couldn't get it out?" "Yes," Spencer answered immediately, "for a whole year now." When he felt himself recovered enough from the throat operation to try public speaking again, he went to a conference in his home area of Arizona. There he explained to a friendly congregation, "I went away to the East and while I was there I fell among thieves and cutthroats. They cut my throat and stole my voice."

The removal of his vocal cords resulted in a peculiar, hoarse voice, easily recognized. Ned Winder, who worked with the Church missionary committee, called Elder Kimball one evening about a mission problem. Ned had a bad cold and a very hoarse voice. He identified himself on the phone and apologized for his hoarseness, but Elder Kimball responded, "Who is this?" Winder repeated his name. After a pause and a chuckle, Elder Kimball responded, "For a minute I thought that I was on both ends of the line."

Humor is a way of dealing with frustration. A friend of some years, commiserating with President Kimball about his recent brain operation, wherein the surgeon drilled a hole through the skull to drain fluid and relieve pressure, said, "I had the same sort of operation; I have a hole in my head, too." The President, though sick, mustered a teasing rejoinder: "I always wondered what was wrong with you." Once, when he was too weak to shave himself, a nurse using an electric shaver worked away for several minutes with no apparent results. Finally he said, "Perhaps it would work better if you took the cap off."

He suffered from pains but hated to take drugs. When I suggested that he should take some aspirin for the latest pain, he replied, referring to all the medications he was taking for his other conditions, "I don't want to take any more pills; I'm already the 'piller' of the Church."



And after the serious surgeries he refused to give up. Once I asked, upon leaving, “Dad, is there anything I can do for you?” “Yes,” he replied, “there is something you can do. You can bury me—but not before I’m dead.”

Though most of Spencer’s humor is oral, typically making mild fun of himself, we find the same kind of wit in his correspondence and his journal. A journal entry when he was in high school records a track meet between his school and another: “Mr. Jones had no one to enter to run so he put me in. I ran mile race and did the best I could. Came out 3rd, close behind 2nd man, but there were only 3 of us running. Ha!! It nearly did me up as I was not used to running so far.” He wrote to his girlfriend: “Dear Miss Eyring, The train is very unsteady, rocking like a steamboat but I will try to scratch you a few lines.” “The picture [of you] came to me here in Salt Lake last night and I laughed as you requested. Ha Ha. It was fine. I promptly cut off the head (ugh!) and pasted it in my watch as I demonstrated for you [I would do].” “I am the only member in the public speaking class so I get individual instruction. I can now breathe clear down to my toes, can roar like a lion or squeak like a mouse. I can gesticulate till you’d think I was hammering or pitching hay. . . . I like all my Profs fine but \_\_\_\_\_ and I can’t hardly stand him. Today he had a dirtier shirt than mine and wore the trousers and shoes he wore while milking the cow.” “Monday I shaved off my old friend Charlie Chaplin and I look like a monkey. It seems a mile from my nose to my mouth. I hope I don’t look like that to you tho’ for it might prove disastrous to me.” At twenty-three he wrote his father, who was on a trip, “Those blamed hogs are enough to worry one bald-headed. One gets out and then they manage it so they keep me chasing pigs all the time. You might be interested in the fact that Nora has had her confinement, bringing a litter of ten. One was ruptured and died in spite of all I could do. A second she deliberately or accidentally laid on. Anyway, it was mashed like a pancake the third morning. A third died last night from some cause that I could not understand unless it too was crippled in the back from being stepped on or knocked about. A fourth is limping on three legs; the old elephant stepped on its front leg. So taking them all together it is not very encouraging.”

This playful note continues in his later correspondence. In 1936, while on the swaying train, just a short hour after leaving home for Europe, he wrote: “Will be a good bronco buster by the time we reach Bowie. We had a glorious trip so far but don’t feel very foreign yet as we’re still in sight of Mt. Graham, or is it the Alps? We nearly got seasick as we came up the San Simon River so we’ll be prepared for the Atlantic.” As a General Authority, he wrote to a friend: “I thought you might have been at the depot as my train went through at five



this morning.” And “I looked down as my airplane passed over your town today but didn’t see you out and around.”<sup>5</sup>

Much of his humor is the play on words. First there is the setup and then the exploitation of ambiguity by reliance on the unexpected second interpretation. For example, when he was a young man starting out in the insurance and real estate business he bragged, “Our business is close to a million dollars.” His tiny office on a side street was just a few feet through the wall from the bank vault—about as close as he could be to the bank’s million dollars. From aboard a ship to Buenos Aires on Church assignment he wrote, “We dress every evening for dinner. That is, the men do; the women mostly undress.” Once an airline hostess asked him, “Would you like something to drink?” He responded, “What do you have?” “Coffee, tea, Coca Cola,” she said. He shook his head, then asked, “Do you have any lemonade?” “No,” she replied, “but I could squeeze you a little.” He recoiled in mock dismay: “Don’t you squeeze me!” And on a long mission tour by car Spencer napped with his head in Camilla’s lap. When the question arose as to what she and the mission president’s wife should do during a priesthood meeting, he suggested they might attend the meeting. Camilla said, “I don’t hold the priesthood.” Spencer replied, “You have been holding the priesthood all morning.”

Finally, the gift for seeing ambiguity in expression is marvelously exemplified in the interchange that occurred when his sister-in-law, who had lived with the Kimballs for twenty-five years, died. I was at their home soon afterward and wanted to be helpful. I asked Dad, “Do you want me to call [my brothers] Andy and Spence, to tell them about Aunt Mary’s death?” “Yes, would you please.” “Would you like me to call one of them before the other?” Pause. “Yes.”<sup>6</sup>

A daughter-in-law once said, “Last week I was complaining that our zucchini was not doing well, but now the vines are growing fine!” President Kimball responded, “You should have complained sooner.”

The heavy burdens of presidency of the Church called forth a wry complaint, dependent again for its thrust on a sense of incongruity with succession by seniority. After he became President of the Church and experienced the demands of the position, he said, wearily, “If I had known it was going to be like this, I never would have run for the office.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1974 President Kimball went to Washington, D.C., to participate in an open house before the temple there was dedicated. On that trip he was invited to come to the United States Senate to offer the invocation. As the Senate was about to convene, only a handful of senators were on the floor of the chamber, most of the others being involved in committee meetings. Someone apologized to President



Kimball for the small number of members there to hear him, but he answered, "That's all right. I was not going to pray to them, anyway."

He managed to make fun of growing older—heavier, stiffer, more forgetful, even blind. At sixty-one he put on a tuxedo and found that "it has been shrinking a bit since I wore it years ago." A 1973 journal entry says, "Everywhere we go people seem to be amazed at our activity at our ages [seventy-eight], which they think are quite advanced. . . . Some of the mission presidents . . . catch our arms to help us and I jokingly say, 'Hold on tight; maybe I can help you up the stairs.' " One day when President Kimball was playing an organ for relaxation, a friend complimented him on the beauty of his playing. The President responded, "I don't play much any more because my fingers are stiff and I don't see very well. But I'm not the only one with problems; I notice that you must have a problem with your hearing."<sup>8</sup>

When he visited Arizona after many years' absence, he asked, "Is that direction south?" Someone said, "Yes." He went on, "I knew it used to be south, but so many other things have changed since we lived here that I thought they might have changed that, too." On the same occasion his sister Alice came to the place he was staying to see him. She gave him a kiss and then greeted various other people in the room. Then she kissed him again, saying, "Did I kiss you already?" He quipped, "The first time must not have impressed you very much." A relative, greeting him, said, "Do you know who I am?" His reply was, "If you don't know who you are, how do you expect me to remember?" This may have been teasing, or it may have been a witty man's cover for the fact that a superlative memory for names and faces was beginning to fade. When Spencer went to Arizona for his brother Gordon's funeral, his nephew drove him to the chapel. Spencer protested, "Nick, the chapel is the other way." Nick said, "Don't worry, I'll get you there." Spencer insisted, "You're going the wrong way." Nick said patiently, "Just wait." At the chapel there was a floral delivery truck. Nick pointed it out. Spencer responded, "Somebody else must be having a funeral." "But you see there, our relatives are going in!" Unwilling to admit defeat, Spencer said, "How can they go to two funerals at the same time?"

At a meeting of General Authorities the President, vision nearly gone, squinted at the gathering and said, "Brethren, I'm sorry I can't see you, but I assume you're here."<sup>9</sup> At another such meeting, after being guided to his seat carefully by two other Church leaders, he jokingly complained he was being "waltzed around" by the pair.<sup>10</sup>

In his last years he joked about death. Driving down the road, Spencer and Camilla saw vultures circling. She said, "I wonder what they're looking for." He replied, "They're looking for me!" Shortly before that, the President had spoken at an area conference where the



local leader, in giving the benediction, had thanked the Lord that the President was well enough to attend the conference. He had also prayed that the President could “die in the saddle.” When it was suggested next day at the Church ranch that the Kimballs go horseback riding, President Kimball said with a smile, “I don’t know whether I want to or not.”<sup>11</sup>

Spencer Kimball was not a great storyteller or stand-up comedian, yet in spite of his serious responsibilities he preserved a comic sense of his own limitations and sometimes kept from sinking under a load of cares by being able to see something laughable in a difficult situation. There are unquestionably more important qualities by which to judge a person, but a warm, friendly sense of humor is by no means the least of virtues. Indeed, in the view of many it ranks well up on the list. And on this criterion, as well as others, Spencer Kimball is a man worth emulating.

Despite his love of humor, though, he tried never to let it dominate. His was the chuckle, not the belly laugh. Spencer Kimball valued humor when kept in bounds and in place. He knew the danger in taking oneself too seriously, but he also recognized a counterbalancing danger in not taking oneself seriously enough. After attending a missionary talent show in South America, he noted in his journal, “I did not mind a little of the slapstick, but when the whole evening of nearly three hours was occupied by it, it seemed to me a waste of time.” He was capable, though, of using humor even in emphasizing more serious things. When he visited Italy and asked why no special missionary meetings had been arranged, he was told that they were merely trying to avoid overtaxing him. He said, “I know what you are trying to do, you are trying to save me. But I don’t want to be saved, I want to be exalted.”<sup>12</sup> At a large public meeting in Ohio where a number of Mormon athletes and he were featured speakers, President Kimball spent some time with a non-Mormon cousin. Afterward this man, sitting in the back seat of the car with Arthur Haycock, the President’s personal secretary, said, “You know, Arthur, you Mormons should make my cousin Spencer a saint, like Saint Peter.” Spencer, sitting in the front seat, overheard the comment, turned around, and said, “No one can make me a saint; I have to do that for myself.”<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“Leader Answers Staff’s Questions on Administration,” *Church News*, 6 January 1979, 19.

<sup>2</sup>Most of the anecdotes have appeared in *Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1977) or *The Story of Spencer W. Kimball: A Short Man, A Long Stride* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1985), both by Edward L. Kimball and Andrew E. Kimball, Jr. Except as noted, others were collected by the author orally or from letters.

<sup>3</sup>One of the few recorded set jokes he did tell appears in the opening scene of the BYU film *A Chosen Servant*. He said, "I am reminded of the man who came out of the bathroom with a cut on his face. His wife asked, 'What's the matter?' And he answered, 'I was concentrating on my speech and cut my face.' She said, 'Why didn't you concentrate on your face and cut your speech?'"

He was not primarily a raconteur, though he sometimes used stories to illustrate his talks—the iceberg, the mistletoe, the hidden wedge, the tidal wave, "Have you been to heaven?"

<sup>4</sup>"Leader Answers Staff's Questions on Administration," 19.

<sup>5</sup>As General Authority he wrote home, after a woman blacked out during his stake conference talk, "It must have been a stiff!!!! sermon!!!"

<sup>6</sup>Elaine Cannon reported a twist on the President's "Do it!" slogan in her talk at April conference 1984. When she asked President Kimball for some advice to the young women of the Church, he said, "Tell them, 'Don't do it!'"

<sup>7</sup>Asked on one occasion by a reporter what he did for entertainment, he replied, "Sleep" (Carma Wadley, "A Young, Vigorous Lifestyle," *Church News*, 6 January 1979, 6).

<sup>8</sup>Harvey Dahl, *The Beehive Sentinel* (Nevada), 13 November 1985, 21.

<sup>9</sup>Paul H. Dunn, address at Brigham Young University, 19 January 1983.

<sup>10</sup>Neal A. Maxwell, as quoted in Associated Press release concerning general conference, 5 October 1985.

<sup>11</sup>Dahl, *The Beehive Sentinel* (Nevada), 21.

<sup>12</sup>"Editors' Note," *This People* 6 (December–January 1985–86): 7.

<sup>13</sup>Apocryphal stories crop up in relation to prominent men. According to one story, after the revelation on priesthood opened the prospect of priesthood leadership for any worthy man, a reporter asked President Kimball, "Will we ever see a black man President of the Church?" President Kimball pondered a moment, then replied solemnly, "Not in my lifetime." Another anecdote related to a proposal before the BYU Board of Trustees to name a building on the campus for him. He supposedly said to the board, "You can name a building for me, if you wish, but please don't make it a short one."

When asked about the stories, President Kimball commented, "I didn't say that, but I wish I had." Even so, the stories are not completely in character for him. The first comes close to making fun of sacred matters; the second might be mistaken as a request for recognition, rather than just a flip comment on his height.

An inside joke made the rounds in 1982: "What do you get when you cross a Spencer W. Kimball with a J. Golden Kimball?—Do it, dammit!" (Leonard J. Arrington, "N. Eldon Tanner, Man of Integrity," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15 [Winter 1982]: 9).