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A Landowner Chides Brigham Young for Not Speaking to Him at Buffalo Canyon, and Receives an Answer

Thomas A. Kuhlman

I call it Buffalo Canyon, but real Westerners would scoff at that. The ravine's edges at their steepest point plunge down an awesome thirty feet; the "canyon floor" is eighty feet across at its widest, and perhaps a thousand feet north to south. Gentler hillsides rise up to the east, west, and south to a grand height of 130 feet. Magnificent! Inspiring! Breathtaking!

So it's not much of a canyon. I call its lowest, most level section Buffalo Wallow. I want to believe that bison hooves pounded down the dusty earth on this spot a century and a half ago, but if they didn't, at least the city fathers of Florence, Nebraska, early in this century gave the name Buffalo Street to some parallel lines on a map of this place. They never actually constructed Buffalo Street, and when Florence was annexed by the City of Omaha, the prosaic designation North Thirty-Fourth Street was given to an imaginary line straight down the center of the canyon. The Florentine officials actually built some streets in the vicinity, like Elk, on the ridge of the bluff to the west, and Prospect, on the bluff to the east, which are called Thirty-Sixth Street and North Ridge Drive today. Clay and Fillmore, the cross streets, retain their original names on today's maps, but they were not constructed, which is why I can almost afford to own my little piece of historic wilderness.

I long dreamed of being a landowner, as my maternal ancestors had been until the Depression. I wanted, too, land that was clearly historic, not just any land, but a parcel of property that had witnessed episodes in the epic of the American West. And it had to be land rich in quiet, spirit-refreshing, natural beauty. But six years

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ago I chose to buy a fine old Georgian mansion close to the university where I teach, and though because of its inner-city location it was not unusually expensive, the payments on its mortgage took enough of my professor's salary that there was really nothing left over to spend on country property. It was just about certain that I could not afford a riverbank cabin, a lakeside summer home, or any sizeable chunk of forest or prairie. Nevertheless, after about three years in my house in town, which I did not want to give up, I began scrutinizing the real estate ads in the *Omaha World Herald*. A year went by, and I saw no rural land I could afford.

Then in the spring of 1988 came the announcement of an auction: a single lot, 66 by 140 feet, in Florence. I drove out to search for the address but found that 8834 North Thirty-Fourth Street existed in name only. The next morning I called the auctioneer. He had not been able to find the lot either, except on paper. But it had to be there, somewhere at the bottom of the ravine. The auction had been announced for 6:13 that evening. "Why at 6:13 exactly?" I asked, assuming that there was some obvious legal explanation I was too ignorant of real estate law to know. "Because I thought that time would arouse people's curiosity," he explained.

The time may possibly have aroused mild curiosity, but it did not attract purchasers. Before leaving for the auction, I promised my wife that I would go no higher than five hundred dollars in my bidding. Deep within, I feared that I'd be so caught up in the dramatic competition that I'd break my promise by two or three hundred dollars. My fear was unnecessary. No one else showed up for the auction, which was conducted in the front seat of the auctioneer's Pontiac. I bought the lot. Price: one dollar.

No one else wanted this ridiculous piece of property on no road, with no utilities, in a part of the city with no significant development. But it had to be sold in order for its owners, sisters in their eighties, to receive government assistance with their nursing home bills. I would of course be responsible for five years of unpaid taxes, which now totalled eighty dollars, and there would be another hundred dollars in court costs.

It was the end of March, and the day after the sale I tramped through the ravine in search of my lot, a Xeroxed plat of Block 115 and an aerial photograph from the city planning department in my hands, my boots sinking to their insteps into the mud of earliest spring. Having decided upon an approximate location for the property, I went to the library to convince myself that the land was as historic as I had assumed it was when I first read of its address. Even without library research, I had known that Lewis and Clark

had passed by on the Missouri River less than half a mile to the east on their historic expedition in 1804 and 1805. Then the fur traders Manuel Lisa and Jean Pierre Cabanne and Peter Sarpy brought commerce to this area in succeeding decades, with the protection briefly of the soldiers of Fort Atkinson, ten miles or so to the north. Major Stephen Long had passed by as well, on his way to tell the world that this was the beginning of the Great American Desert, land that would be forever unfit for agrarian life. And my own ancestors in 1856 and 1857 had almost certainly gazed upon these bluffs from the decks of the steamboats taking them to their pioneer settlements in northeast Nebraska. But most significant of all, on this land, quite probably on my very two-tenths of an acre, the Latter-day Saints had paused for two years on their epic migration to the Great Salt Lake.

Their story was somewhat familiar to me. When my wife and I moved to Nebraska in 1967 from our first home in Washington, D.C., we had entered the state by crossing the Mormon Bridge to Florence. During our seventeen years of living three miles to the north, we heard and read much about the Mormon experience at Winter Quarters. Several times we took out-of-town guests to the cemetery where perhaps six hundred of the four thousand who lived on the west side of the river had been buried, victims of starvation, cold, and plague in the terrible years from 1846 to 1848. We knew that the Mormons here had been visited by the Indians Big Elk and Logan Fontenelle and by the famous Jesuit missionary Pierre DeSmet. Now I read more of these people, and of General George Crook, the Indian fighter who headed the Department of the Platte in the 1870s, just two miles to the South at Fort Omaha, where during World War I the army maintained its first and largest balloon school. I read, too, of Ponca Chief Standing Bear, who crossed this land with his tribe on their way to exile in Oklahoma, and who dared to come back to their homeland without government permission, an act whose ultimate consequence was the official recognition of an Indian's constitutional rights.

This was historic land, then, that I had purchased. If I listened, I told myself, I would hear the ghosts of these figures from history: the Jesuit, the explorers, traders, soldiers, Indians, and Mormons. But first I would get to know the nature of the land itself.

My lot was one of four on the western edge of Block 115. That first morning of my possession of it, brown leaves from the previous year still covered earth warming under a gradually strengthening sun. No foliage yet shaded the forest carpet, and no green shoots punctuated the dull colors of winter. Each afternoon for a week I drove out to work for an hour or two or three, opening

up trails with a variety of cutting tools, sometimes with just my hands, gloved usually, but not always. After a day of teaching and its concomitant reading and paper work, I relished the rhythm of mindless physical labor. My younger colleagues and much younger students expended their calories with the currently fashionable aerobic exercises to the sound of rock music; I preferred this exercise with its background chorus of the new season's first robins. So I blistered my fingers and palms so ruthlessly that upon returning home one day I discovered I could not play the piano as I was accustomed to do each evening before dinner. So I let my thighs and hips and sometimes even the back of my neck or my face be whipped by stinging branches that left welts and scratches. I didn't care. This was my piece of woods. It was a warm spring, and after a half hour of sawing, hacking, breaking, bending, stooping, and lifting and hurling brush and dead timber and thorny vines, I'd remove my jacket and then my shirt; soon my T-shirt was soaked with sweat, but I was working in my own paradise and could not stop.

In a week, as though in gratitude for my labors, the land responded with its first green. Instead of working, I could come out to my lot simply to enjoy it, to discover Dutchman's britches and purple violets and myrtle. Soon the brown leaves on the ground were replaced by the leaves of woodbine and moonseed, of false Solomon's seal and raspberry, columbine, and honeysuckle, and clouds of blue phlox. On a morning when fallen logs still glistened with frost and my breath turned to steam, I listened to hawks and blue jays, cardinals and orioles, crows and meadowlarks. By late April it was warm enough to take some books—histories of the Mormons, biographies of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, the diaries of Hosea Stout—and read in the sun on the canyon floor where towering burr oaks and black walnuts and cottonwoods still cast no leafy shadows.

By May these trees were shading my canyon, as earlier my hillside paths had been shaded by dogwoods, wild plums, and small elms. It was now necessary to take my books and blankets on free afternoons to the open meadow halfway up the hill to the east. This meadow was not on my land, as some of the paths I had cleared were not, but it would be. In the weeks since the auction, I had come to know the Douglas County Court House and its constituent parts, and what could be found in the treasurer's office and in the offices of the clerk of the district court and the register of deeds. I found that no one had been paying taxes on most of the other lots on Blocks 114 and 115. No one was planning to use this land or to develop it. More important, it seemed, no one had decided to love it.

I searched through records, hoping to find owners who would let me pay their delinquent taxes and buy their lots for a price I could afford, fearing that owners could not be found, that the land was unsalable. Oh yes, I had been bitten not only by mosquitoes at Buffalo Canyon, but by the more deadly bug, greed. I made phone calls. A man who owned two lots would sell me his. So would another. Eight contiguous lots were registered in the name of a third owner, but he was deceased and his estate not settled. Among those eight, two comprised the meadow which by mid-May I had decided was essential to the character of my special place, and two others lay on either side of my first purchase. Dear God, I prayed, let those all become available!

By early summer I was back at my labors, stooping and whacking with a sickle, always careful to wear gloves, to eliminate the nettles and poison ivy that now threatened to overwhelm my trails. For a few weeks I had no classes to teach, and then six weeks of classes only until noon, and each afternoon I was out at the meadow with my blanket, a picnic jug of ice water, some suntan lotion, and books. Books on Mormons were succeeded by volumes on trees and wildflowers, and I would stroll my paths, pulling at branches to see if leaves were simple or compound, alternate or opposite, smooth-edged or toothed. I walked from silver maple to hackberry to basswood to red cedar, confident in the certainty of my identification. I searched for the eastern hop hornbeam that I knew had to be there, and worried over the difference between shagbark and bitternut hickory. I cursed in frustration when one book told me I was looking at a white mulberry and another said it was a red mulberry. Too many times I stupidly stabbed myself in an effort to distinguish the shorter thorn of the black locust from the longer one of the honey locust.

My study of the Buffalo Canyon flora depended on two sources: books and a local nature conservancy center, the privately owned Fontenelle forest. The major unit of the forest comprises one thousand acres of heavily timbered bluffs and bottomland just south of Omaha. A recent addition is a unit of smaller tracts of upland meadow and woods about two miles north of my land. Each unit has a resident naturalist, and when I was stumped by a leaf or a blossom not clearly identified in a book, I would take the specimen to him or her. When midsummer brought to my meadow wildflowers so showy that they would evoke pride in a serious backyard gardener, I took examples out to the young naturalist at the north unit, Neale Woods. It was almost closing time, but with a broad smile on his face he cheerfully wrote out both the English and Latin names of my treasures: wild bergamot or horsemint

(*monarda fistulosa*), tall bellflower (*campanula americana*), and purple vervain (*verbena stricta*). In the autumn I followed a young woman guide through the wetlands of the south unit to identify wingstem (*actinomeris alternafolia*), white snakeroot (*eupatorium urticaefolium*), and false boneset. Of course I knew my goldenrod and brown-eyed Susans, but she taught me how to pinch the tiny pods of the cunning jewelweed or touch-me-not to send seeds spurting out in an arc like intercontinental missiles. How insistent nature is in devising different ways to propagate her various species! Back I went to Buffalo Canyon with my wife, each of us trying to outdo the other in touching the touch-me-nots.

One of the most pleasant moments of the summer had come when I was using books to help me identify flowers. Lying prone on my blanket in the meadow, a book propped against the small rock I would eventually use as a pillow for an afternoon nap, I needed to move neither my torso nor my left arm as I reached out with my right and picked a blossom. I held it up against a photograph in the book. In size and color the flower and the photo matched exactly. The fact that I already knew the name *Robin's plantain* or *daisy fleabane* in no way diminished my joy. Let other citizens of Omaha savor their delight in BMWs and Porsches, in sailboats and video recorders and gilt-edged stocks: nothing could be more satisfying than what I was experiencing on my own piece of land! I rolled over and rubbed Coppertone on my chest, watching a hawk circling above in the deep blue sky. Buffalo Canyon was my paradise.

One reason it was so was the paradox that while it offered me the joy of country solitude, just two blocks to the east, on the bottomland below my bluff, stood a public library (the source of these books on history and trees and wildflowers—could anything be more deliciously convenient for a professor?), the offices of our family dentist and veterinarian, and buildings occupied by my wife's hairdresser, a druggist, a barber, and the state driver's license testing station. Adjacent to them were the gas station where I had my Plymouth serviced, a bowling alley, a hardware store, and a pizza parlor (locally owned, not part of a chain). Two more family restaurants, an ice cream stand, and a post office were no more than a ten-minute walk from the quietness of my canyon. And my old parish church: I'd been lector and cantor there, had written its diamond jubilee history; there at St. Philip Neri my children had made their first communions and been confirmed. Immediately east of my land was the building of the Florence Arts and Humanities Council, of which I had been president in 1981. This truly was my community, even if my residence was six miles due south.

Did I want history? Right here was the red brick building of the defunct Bank of Florence, erected in 1854, now a museum, as was the nearby depot of the abandoned Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Omaha Railroad. But most historic of all, just beyond the brand new fire station, just beyond the spot where Brigham Young's house once stood, a tiny, windowless shed-like structure leaned precariously towards the Missouri a hundred yards east. This was the mill erected by the Mormons in 1847, the only building left from the days of Winter Quarters.

Thus every day I congratulated myself on my decision to establish my "country place" where I did. *Rus in urbe* became my motto, country in the city. I would adopt another Latin phrase too: *otium cum dignitate*, leisure with dignity. I could stand beneath giant oaks in my canyon, certain that at least some of them had risen from this soil before the Mormons came. Surely Brigham Young himself had stood beneath one of these trees. And surely, one of these days, I would hear what he had to say.

But somehow on those halcyon afternoons he had nothing to communicate to me. Perhaps he was questioning an Indian or a soldier or even Father DeSmet himself about the best route across the Plains through the Rockies to the Great Salt Lake. I liked to imagine that, but as this was a subject irrelevant to my situation the Mormon leader made no effort to include me in his colloquies.

The fact was, my days were too painless, too hedonistic. The blisters I'd acquired with my fanatic hacking of paths in the spring had long healed and had never really been severe. I was no pioneer. I had sought out this canyon not as a step towards fulfilling a divinely ordained destiny for a whole people, but as a place for selfish escape, for sentimental romanticizing. Walt Whitman had written lines that I might appropriate: "I loaf, and invite my soul." Brigham Young had no time for loafers. Imagine a middle-aged man stretched out on his back, watching as October inflamed the sumac and turned the ash and elms to gold, watching fat grasshoppers playing among the tall stalks of prairie clover. Oh, I had been practical enough to acquire four full acres by autumn, twenty more lots than I had in March, and I had learned the names of several dozen plants, but had Buffalo Canyon given insight, or truth, or wisdom?

My twenty-year-old son had forced me to do at least some rationalizing. He was going through his socialist stage: private property is theft. John was the later Tolstoy; his heroes were Gandhi and Thoreau and Martin Luther King. So I stressed to him that at Buffalo Canyon my intention was to protect the environment, to hold it in trust for posterity as an ecological laboratory. I'd planned

my trails in such a way as to avoid causing erosion. I cut no more trees than were necessary for the passage of one body from one place to another, or, following the example of famous eighteenth-century English landscape architect "Capability" Brown, to open up a charming vista.

And I engaged in intellectual wrestling matches with Ralph Waldo Emerson. A dozen years before I had written a modestly prize-winning play on the theme of his poem "Hamatraya," which mocks landlords who think that because their names are recorded on deeds at a courthouse they therefore are truly the possessors of the earth. The very week I purchased the hilltop lots that gave me street access to my property, I assigned my literature students William Faulkner's short novel *The Bear*, whose theme is, once again, that only the fatuous believe they can ever own the land God created for our stewardship.

And so I was cautioned by the voices of many, but for all my reading of Mormon history I heard nothing from Brigham Young. Thanksgiving came, and I gave thanks that I had a country place where my son and his friends could build a campfire and toast marshmallows and drink hot chocolate. I gave thanks for all the pleasure my family and I had enjoyed since I first purchased the single tiny lot at the auction in the front seat of an automobile.

But if I have implied that on balance the year had been a good one, one of happiness unalloyed, I have been misleading. It had, in fact, been a terrible year, I said to myself on the afternoon of Christmas Eve as I stood on my Buffalo Canyon hilltop gazing in silence across the Mill Creek valley to the gray-brown Ponca Hills to the north. It had been the most painful year in a decade, and its ending was positively black. In early March, my expected promotion to full professor, so long worked for, had been denied, a denial doubly crushing because it was a second one. Although the summer heat and drought that had so terribly hurt Midwestern farmers had not hurt me economically (I'd walked the brown lawns of Nauvoo in August trying to feel a Mormon-Buffalo Canyon connection in unbearable furnace-like heat), I'd been depressed to see my region's land so burned and sere and my fellow citizens made worthless. Personally I had found the constant humidity so energy-sapping that I could not bring forth creative scholarship, thus postponing even more any chance of promotion. In the autumn, the novel I'd slaved over for half a dozen years was rejected by a New York agent who had earlier suggested it was a good one, wise and witty and salable.

Then there had been the burden of my father, whose stroke in late 1987 had left him with the mind of a five-year-old all through

1988. Only seventy-seven, he had lain every day in a tiny room in a nursing home, window drapes drawn at his insistence. In October he had fallen, dislocating a shoulder, and would probably never walk again. A six-footer, he now weighed a hundred and twenty pounds. He refused to watch television and could not understand the words in a large-print book, but organically he was sound as a Japanese yen. He would go on this way indefinitely, toothless, hollow-cheeked, and with no pension, his life's savings having been used up in September. Since his stroke, I had been responsible for his pitifully small business affairs and had lain awake hundreds of nights contemplating the mountains of paperwork concerning his medical bills, his insurance, and ultimately, his acceptance as a welfare client. Each of my twice-weekly visits was an ordeal as I contrasted his pitiful condition with what he once had been.

Two other events, though, stood out as the tragedies of the year, and though they affected me only indirectly I stood on my hilltop on Christmas eve with a mood of weary resentment towards God. The afternoon was not cold, and the snowless hillside lay dull and brown. A pale sun neared the treetops across my canyon to the west as I thought of the twenty-two-year-old student at my university who had been found on the floor of his car, a suicide, just a few days before. A high school classmate of my son, he had been missing two weeks, having disappeared just before final exams from the apartment he shared with three other Creighton boys. On that night he had called one of my son's best friends, hinting not at all of suicide. They had been dating on and off for a few months, and therefore in the days before his body was found she was summoned to the police station to be questioned for an entire afternoon, most of those hours in tears. Two hundred of the boy's high school classmates formed a search party, scouring the city for his missing car. The FBI joined the case, but it was his cousin who discovered the body—with a plastic bag tied around his head. No one had suspected that the young man suffered something so terrible that he would consider self-destruction.

Then as Christmas drew nearer, a terrorist's bomb sent Pan American Flight 103 plunging in flames into Lockerbie, Scotland, killing 280, among them thirty-eight students from Syracuse University. One of them was the sister of one of my daughter's friends. *Why, O Lord, does there have to be such suffering? Why have you put us in a world of so much cruelty and pain?* What cause, I asked, have we to be joyous on December 25th, when our lives and the lives of those about us feel hurt so out of proportion to our yearning to do good?

For nine months now I had been coming to Buffalo Canyon. Never had my spirits been so low as they were this afternoon of the day before Christmas. I had health, and so did my wife and children; so many things were good for us, but I knew that all things were not good for so many others. Was living worth its cost in inescapable suffering?

For nine months I had told myself that Brigham Young had stood on this hilltop. He must have gazed wistfully, as I was gazing, at the beauty of the blue Iowa bluffs. But by now it had become clear that whatever he had spoken, whatever he had thought, simply had no relevance to me in 1988. Our situations were too different. He had played the leading part in a romantic historical pageant, and my life had nothing in common with his. The hum of trucks on the interstate highway across the valley proved that my modern world lacked any connection with the world of Mormon handcarts and sod-roofed cabins. For a long time I stood silent and alone, empty, sick at heart, grieving not just for myself but for the hopelessness of humanity, from Omaha to earthquake-devastated Armenia and around the globe back to Omaha again.

You're ready to hear me now, Brigham Young said. You didn't know us before, or really care about us. We were to you merely an element of local color, characters in a technicolor movie, a program of entertainment from Disneyland. You could use us to decorate your leisure hours by giving a patina of age to a piece of real estate you purchased. We were a tourist attraction, distracting attention from the easy ordinariness of your comfortable life. It is easy to step out for a moment from your air-conditioned or heated Plymouth to read words on a steel sign and then go away, saying, "It sure must have been tough in those days." And so you knew nothing about me, really, however much you read as you lay browning in the summer sun in the meadow below us. I was standing here, beside these oaks and lindens, it is true, but what was in my heart you were not ready to hear. Now think of another Christmas Eve, and consider my agony, knowing that I had brought four thousand human souls to this place to endure hunger and cold so terrible that for one in ten, their bodies were rotting. Think of the black flesh, the burning fevers of my people, parents wasting away, babies limp and starving. Do you think that I never stood on this hill you claim as yours, and demanded of my Lord that he give me understanding of why obeying his will brought so great a heart-ache? And do you think he gave me no answer? If you do, come walk with me.

I felt not alone as I walked that late afternoon three blocks south on North Ridge Drive to the Mormon Pioneer Cemetery on

State Street. I stood for a few minutes looking at Fairbanks's heroic bronze statue of Mormon parents grieving over their child's grave, and finally to the west the sun seemed to grow grandly brighter as it touched the horizon, filling all the land around me with a golden glory.

And behold, I am the light and the life of the world; and I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning. (3 Ne. 11:11)

It had taken nine months of visits to Buffalo Canyon to blend my soul with its holy history.

And the mourning, and the weeping, and the wailing of the people who were spared alive did cease; and their mourning was turned into joy, and their lamentations into the praise and thanksgiving unto the Lord Jesus Christ, their Redeemer. (3 Ne. 10:10)

Westward, westward towards the sunset Brigham Young had led them because for them the God of us all had a plan grander than any human mind could conceive. The plan included sickness and pain, poverty and hardship, but this afternoon I understood the glory of its fulfillment. Each of us, I realized, Mormon or Gentile, must suffer as God's Son suffered, almost to the point of despair. But always, I realized that Christmas Eve, there was sunset, and glory, and the promise of dawn.

I walked back to my land at Buffalo Canyon and got into my car. I turned on the radio, and though this seems too neat, too pat, a writer's trick, this is what actually occurred: as I drove down Clay Street to Thirtieth and what was once the center of the Winter Quarters of the Camps of Israel, I listened to the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's *Messiah*. It ended as I turned north toward the Mormon Bridge, and the announcer said, "You have been listening to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir."

And at last I had been listening to Brigham Young.