

Truman Madsen, On His Education

In the beginning was “Grantsville,” where our homes abutted Grandfather’s (President Heber J. Grant’s) bungalow high on the avenues in Salt Lake City. Here lived the families of seven of his ten daughters: a clustering community, close in every way. In the mix were well over thirty cousins.

These surroundings and the death of my mother, Grandfather’s ninth daughter, when I was only two years old, meant three things. First, from birth and, as it were, by adoption, I, and my two brothers, were enveloped in this large, cultured, traveled, studious, bookish family. Second, we were tutored by grandparents and parents for whom religion compassed the universe. Truth is truth wherever found. So it is with the good and beautiful. Third, my father, who didn’t remarry until we three boys were all married, devoted much of his time and life to his sons. Through him and our sensitive and caring aunts, my educated mother’s influence was transmitted.

Grandfather Grant was anxious that his children have the best educational opportunities he could provide. For example, throughout the several years he was president of the European Mission, he arranged for his wife, Emily Wells Grant, to acquaint his daughters with the European heritage. They traveled in Britain and on the Continent, visiting the historic sites, opera houses, museums, castles, concert halls.

In due time my mother became the first woman to graduate from the University of Utah in mathematics and, I believe, with highest honors. She then attended Radcliffe College in Boston and studied modern literature. Until her marriage she was a teacher at a Salt Lake college. To my sorrow, I didn’t inherit mother’s propensity for advanced mathematics, though I did for literature.

My father introduced us to the great books. He had only a high school education, but he was a wide-ranging and voracious reader. At a crucial point in his teens, when he was trying to find a spiritual footing, he fasted and prayed—according, I suppose, to Moroni’s formula—then opened the Book of Mormon at random. His eye fell on the verse “O then, is not this real? I say unto you, Yea, because it is light; and whatsoever is light, is good” (Alma 32:35). (I have only lately realized how many of my essays touch on the theme of light.) That, and similar experiences, put Jesus Christ at the center of his life and, as we grew up, of ours. His mission to California, his work as a director of Temple Square, and twenty-eight years of service on the general board of the Mutual Improvement Association pushed his roots deep into vital religion.

So our exposure to the scriptures and, as we matured, the classics was a nightly event. This was before television, the Web, and electronic games. Reading aloud in rotation was an education in itself. From our earliest years together we took turns, our father nudging us in our pacing and diction and pronunciation. He was a self-taught master of English. If we didn’t know a word, he would ask us to look it up. “Consult the dictionary, and you will remember it.”

My public education began with Wasatch School, then Ensign School, then Bryant Junior High School, then on to East High School, even though East was some distance away. Many of us commuted by bus. In the public schools, I think I was simply a “cafeteria” student, taking a little of this and a little of that and getting by. In retrospect, three things stand out.

First, my study of Latin, though superficial, helped me immensely with English. The first word I learned in Latin was from an almost deaf uncle who loved to read the Bible in early translations. The word was *misericordium*, which

means “compassion.” Everything I have since written on the roles of the Messiah embraces that core insight.

Second, my teachers had an individual concern for students. One took me aside and said, “I’ve seen the results of your IQ test. You’re not carrying enough of a load; you’re just taking easy stuff.” She meant classes like gym, study hall, shorthand, and transcription.

Third, there was generated in me a perpetual fascination with music and the arts. This bloomed under Lisle Bradford, one of the most talented and disciplining choir directors in the West. I sang bass in her a cappella choir. In rehearsal and performance I never took my eyes off her. Artistic impulses were reinforced by two distinguished figures on the Madsen side of my family, Drs. Franklin and Florence Madsen, thanks to whom our home was heavy-laden with classical music recordings and piano rolls. Uncle Frank also taught me and my brothers some vocal lessons and the rudiments of conducting.

Whenever we had to speak in school, in church, or in public—such assignments were more frequent in those days—Dad was a conscientious coach. His younger brother, Julius, and he had been thespians, Julius directing and my father performing in the legendary “Mission Play” in a huge theater in San Gabriel, California. An astounding three thousand performances were given before the Depression closed the play. These Madsen brothers brought a dramatic flair to everything they did. For us, repetitive practice did not make perfect, but it did make clear. Dad would persist, “You can say that better.” In the same mode, we were often encouraged to repeat back at the dinner table the gist of what we had learned each day in school. This enhanced my sensitivity to the spoken as well as the written word, a bent toward teaching, and a passion to communicate.

I early made it a rule, when teaching, to imagine the person or persons I was quoting sitting in the corner of the class. They would check every sentence, glare at even the slightest distortion, and approve and applaud only if I presented their case as they would. Only then would critical analysis or evaluation begin.

During my first two years at the University of Utah, I was groping for a major. To earn my way, I worked every school night as a waiter, from nine p.m. till one a.m. Bedtime was about two a.m. I would go to my classes blurry. Each morning I woke up saying to myself, “This weekend I’m going to quit the job. This is crazy.” But then by evening, I’d be more alert and go back to work. Amidst my college sampling of subjects, there was one constant. I took every class offered by Lowell Bennion and T. Edgar Lyon at the University of Utah Institute of Religion. Bennion, a living social conscience, could fill the blackboard with ideas elicited from his thoughtful questions about scriptural texts and contexts. Lyon was a mine shaft of scrupulously accurate history, particularly church history. He taught me to shave away myths from facts.

The war slowed down the normal educational processes. My older brother joined the air force. Because I had slipped a disk in high school I was classified “4-F” and was therefore rejected in the draft. Instead, I joined the civilian-military in the Ninth Service Command at Fort Douglas. I drove every kind of truck in the motor pool, even eighteen-wheelers. Maneuvering in the driver’s seat was bearable, amidst sciatic pain, but standing was torment. Finally, when all else failed, I had surgery.

Then came the mission. My older brother and I were called at the same time, had a joint farewell, and were assigned to the same mission. It was New England, which then included the Maritime provinces of Canada, under President S. Dilworth Young. He was a General Authority, a wise practicalist—he sent us out without purse or scrip—and also a man of poetic sensitivities and gifts. He extended my mission three months, pulled me into the mission office, and amidst the daily regimen, encouraged me toward creative writing. Cambridge was an academic crossroads, and we saw the comings and goings of LDS scholars at MIT, Harvard, and adjacent schools.

A few days after my return home, John A. Widtsoe, then of the Twelve and himself a Harvard man, spoke in my hearing. His easy familiarity with sacred writings, history, poetry, and the latest word in natural science impressed me. Shyly I approached him afterward and said, "Could I talk to you sometime about vocation?" I knew he'd been a university president.

He invited me to his home. Almost every room was shelved with books from floor to ceiling. He asked, "What are you interested in? What have you done?" Then, "You haven't focused on anything yet."

I nodded.

"That's the trouble with you young people. You take classes on impulse. You need to look ahead twenty years and ask yourself, 'What do I want to be twenty years from now?'"

After further probing, he said, "The future belongs to science." And then, "Think about Homer's field [Homer Durham taught political science]." Aside from his specific counsel, Elder Widtsoe recommended three searching questions that influenced my later decisions: "What am I good at, or what, in time, could I become good at? What do I like to do? What does the world need?" (Elder Widtsoe later told me that he had to relearn the fundamentals of his field—agrarian chemistry—three times. Little did I know then how radically the premises of philosophical analysis would shift in my lifetime.)

Back at the University of Utah, I toyed with political science as a major for a time. Several of my friends were eventually able to combine political studies with law, then enter civil service. That was the direction my brothers were going. I soon learned that political theory is itself enmeshed in philosophical frameworks. I would become enamored of the three Johns of American republicanism: John Milton, John Locke, John Stuart Mill.

In my senior year, the consensus of my professors was that I would do well in three areas: comparative literature, psychology, and philosophy. In the field of literature, it was S. B. Neff, a slow-spoken, pedantic, Oxford type who taught me Shakespeare. Louis Zucker, a classicist who brought Homer to life, was another mentor. Probably without realizing it, he planted in me the seed of a lifetime interest in Judaism. Brewster Ghiselin had done a benchmark book called *The Creative Process*, a collection of the methodologies of famous writers, scientists, and mathematicians. I learned from his class some implications of Paul Valry's "one line given of God." Along the way, C. Lowell Lees, the theater man, tutored me in French and pushed me toward Professors Plummer and Garff in speech.

As for psychology, I experimented one summer with graduate courses in that field. The training, though brief, was helpful when, decades later, I joined in some projects with clinical psychologist Allen Bergin.

The three prominent philosophers at the University of Utah were Waldemar Read, a recognized authority on John Dewey and the pragmatists; O. C. Tanner, whose course in the philosophy of religion provided a comprehensive overview; and Sterling McMurrin, whose long suit was the history of ideas. In all my studies since, I have found no one who can match McMurrin for his approach to the free-will-determinism issue, his assessment of the philosophical implications of a nite God, or his account of theodicy. McMurrin also alerted me to the writings of historian-theologian B. H. Roberts. Years later when I was assigned to write a biography of Roberts, I was, in a measure, prepared.

Toward the end of my undergraduate days, one of my professors suggested I try for the Rhodes Scholarship in PPE—philosophy, politics, and economics. I reached the finals but did not attain the scholarship. After I completed the

required spectrum of philosophy courses, I graduated.

For a master's degree I proposed working in the history of philosophy and writing a thesis on psychologist-philosopher William James. My prospectus was approved by Professor Read. Timid about line-by-line scrutiny, I went home, hid up for several months, and returned with the thesis complete. Shortly thereafter, McMurrin called me in and said with a smile, "You have written a thesis we can't turn down, but what do you think a committee is for?" The committee met, made suggestions, and gave me an oral examination. The degree was granted. My thesis title was "The Ethics of William James."

The more I studied philosophy, the more my concern was to specialize prior to generalizing. What emerged as the "stuffing" of my philosophical inquiries was biblical studies and the history of religion. So we return to my intrigue with Harvard. Hesitantly and prematurely I had earlier applied to Harvard's graduate program, but not in philosophy. Harvard had turned me down. So I assumed that door was closed.

I then considered and actually traveled to four colleges in California: University of Southern California, UCLA, Stanford, and UC Berkeley. When I walked into the library at USC, a brochure on the bulletin board headlined "The F. C. S. Schiller Essay Contest" announced an award for the best essay on William James's philosophy of life. I won the contest and then the Mudd Fellowship in philosophy at USC. I was assuming that would be where I would complete my Ph.D.

Again, I studied philosophy and religion side by side. The departments intertwined. Personalist Ralph Tyler Flewelling was one of the impressive figures. He was touted in Russia as a prime threat to dialectical materialism. Donald Rhoades gave an outstanding course in types of religious philosophy. Donald Rowlingson solidified my grasp of higher and lower criticism of the Bible. Here also I first heard a guest lecturer, Martin Buber, unaware that I would someday be associated with the Buber Institute in Jerusalem and immersed in Hasidism. Then, sitting in the library one day, I had a strange thought: "Now you can go to Harvard." I applied again, this time sending my USC graduate record, and was admitted.

The dominant philosophy at Harvard then was logical positivism, sometimes called logical empiricism and language analysis. W. V. Quine was the master logician, and British philosophers Gilbert Ryle and J. L. Austin were invited to hold special seminars. Three exceptions to the mold were Harry Austryn Wolfson, who taught Spinoza; Platonist Raphael Demos; and Henry Aiken, who was into new models of ethical discourse. John Wild, advocate of Aristotle and Thomism, was now championing existentialism and Heidegger.

My doctoral exams were in three required fields: history of philosophy, metaphysics and epistemology, and ethics. Then I opted away from the fourth area, which was set-theory and formal logic. At the cost of another year, I undertook doctoral exams in the history and philosophy of religion: Old Testament, New Testament, history of theology, Augustine, Calvin, Kierkegaard, D.C. Macintosh, and Paul Tillich. Kenneth Ch'en gave me private tutoring in Buddhism. The biblical text men were Robert Pfeiffer, Amos Wilder, and Krister Stendahl. I had by now married a budding Old Testament scholar, Ann, with whom eventually I studied Hebrew. She would deepen my roots, especially in Isaiah.

Tillich had come during my second year at Harvard. He was appointed University Professor, which meant he could teach anything he chose, and credit was given in any department in the university, including philosophy. His flagship courses were religion and culture and the history of Christian thought.

The professor who “Englished” Tillich’s thick Germanic style was John Dillenberger, a Reformation theologian. He coordinated my work in the history and philosophy of religion. He later became head of the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley, which was one reason why I was invited there as a commuting professor. The union is a consortium of ten different schools in the San Francisco area.

Now I needed a dissertation topic. Could I use the tools of analytic philosophy and language analysis? I proposed a critical dissertation on Paul Tillich’s theory of religious symbols. Tillich made a radical disjunction between literal and symbolic usage, between sign and symbol. His position, which permeates his entire systematic theology, could be called pansymbolism: everything religious is symbolic. He shifts from issues of truth or falsehood to the question of whether symbols do or do not express “ultimate concern,” his definition of religion. For Tillich, the entire world of interpretation since Philo, scriptures included, is grounded in one imperative: Don’t take it literally.

My analysis attempted to show, in a word, that his distinction is an untenable dualism, that when he himself asks, “What does the symbol mean?” he either leaves the symbol hanging, resorts to negations, or reintroduces literal meanings and many of the very propositions his theory claims to exclude. Tillich gave full approval to those who resisted him only if they had a technical apparatus and arguments that were in a measure original. Under that edict I flourished. My degree was granted. All this was a dress rehearsal for work I have since done on texts of the restoration in terms of clarification and comparison.

This, in outline, is the background of my work in philosophy and theology, some textual studies, a preoccupation with Joseph Smith—what can be seen in and through his massive contribution—in the total sweep of Western religion, and my forays into church history, biography, and the thought and character of the main figures of the restoration movement.

When I left Harvard, many opportunities were unforeseen, not even dots on the horizon. My involvement with all of them has given me a sense of meaning in my earlier studies. These include:

1. The Institute of Mormon Studies, which enlarged research projects in and beyond the Mormon purview.
2. The Religious Studies Center and its monograph series, including several in comparative religion, such as *Reflections on Mormonism* and *The Temple in Antiquity*.
3. The Richard L. Evans Chair. This endowed chair sponsored me through more than five hundred trips to colleges and universities and institutions worldwide. It has brought one hundred fifty guest lecturers to seminars, workshops, and symposia at BYU. It also helped underwrite my guest professorships at Northeastern University in Boston, Haifa University in Israel, and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley.
4. The National Endowment for the Humanities. My White House appointment to this panel of thirteen scholars and thirteen citizens was for six years. We were entrusted with hundreds of millions of dollars to supplement projects in libraries, museums, research institutions, scholarships, and the like. We met every three months as final arbiters. These concentrated decisions taxed every strand of my training in the humanities.
5. The Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies. To me, this building and curriculum have meant five years living in the Holy Land, forty-five directed study tours, and two years as director.
6. *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, a Macmillan project that I helped to edit. After favorable reviews, it is finding its way into libraries throughout the world.
7. The Dead Sea Scrolls Foundation, which is now bringing world recognition to BYU in the recovery and digitizing of ancient texts, including heretofore baffling Dead Sea Scroll fragments.

Years ago I aspired to write a book on the variety and unity of Mormon experience—to present a verifiability thesis and plead for the reopening of many windows to the totality of human experience. The Mormon heritage is nothing if it is not experiential. Overall, I see it as the one mighty hope of reunion among the world faiths and in world thought. Our century has been dominated—in philosophy, in much theology, and in the scientific and technological fields—by the experience of the absence of God. The future, for those who can join hands with the Latter-day Saints, is in the experience of the presence of God.

Over the years, as I've traveled the circuit of adult education, I've tried to encourage students at every stage of life. I have urged that we don't have an accurate measure of an individual's "intelligence" and that, even if we did, it is not, contrary to the popular impression, a fixed entity. It can be increased and honed. We all have different talents, and the good news is that everyone is, or can become, a bit of a genius at something.

I see our legacy, therefore, as an inescapable mandate: to be lifetime learners and, simultaneously, teachers. Said Joseph Smith, "We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up, or we shall not come out true 'Mormons.'¹ We must, in John Taylor's phrase, reach for "everything pertaining to learning of every kind."² Many lose heart about making any sort of contribution because they see people who are thirty or forty years down the road and conclude, "I could never do that." But to paraphrase William James, if you remain faithfully busy in your chosen field or avocation each available hour of the working day, you can with confidence count on waking up some morning one of the competent ones of your generation.

In the few areas in which I consider myself competent, I have tried to be diligent and studious and to learn from oncoming generations. I live in gratitude for students and associates who have excelled their mentor. All I have done, I think, will be done over again and better. Because of my multiple interests, I'm sure I have scattered energies when I could have been more focused. To bring them all to fruit, I need a longer life—much longer.

Notes

1. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 316.

2. *Journal of Discourses*, 21:100.