

Truman Madsen, Valued Teacher

Dillon K. Inouye

We are thankful to the Lord, we fortunate ones, for a good friend if we have one, an exemplar if we know one, a stern and sturdy scriptural giant if we seek one, a teacher “sent from God” if we are lucky enough to learn from one, and an all-around splendid exemplar of the Christian element of the broad human race. Truman is many things, of which the above suggestions are only the beginning.

Elder Marion D. Hanks, on Truman Madsen’s seventieth birthday

Introduction

No celebration of the professional life of Truman G. Madsen would be complete without an acknowledgment of his contributions as a teacher. Although it is difficult to take the measure of a man while he is still living, I believe that any assessment will show that few teachers in the history of the professorate have had a greater influence on students. He joins Karl G. Maeser, B. H. Roberts, and Hugh Nibley, and others as a bellwether, for example, for faithful Mormon intellectuals. In addition, as much as any other teacher in the history of Brigham Young University, he has served as a bridge builder, assisting some to understand and others to respect the messages of the restored gospel.

Reading this personal tribute embarrassed Truman. When he saw it, he quoted President Gordon B. Hinckley’s statement, “Adulation is poison.” I see my tribute as appreciation, not adulation, and I attributed Truman’s concerns about toxicity to his characteristic modesty.

Truman in the Classroom

I am one of thousands of students whom Truman taught during his university career. Many know him better and have worked more closely with him, but I may be more representative of his typical student. I first met Truman in 1961, when he was in his fourth year at Brigham Young University and I was a freshman in his Book of Mormon and introduction to philosophy courses. He taught in the old Joseph Smith Building, which was at the time the center of BYU campus.

Truman looked like a philosopher. He was taller than average, with deep-set eyes and a large head. His characteristic expression suggested thought and mental activity. Because of his angular features, charismatic presence, flair for the dramatic, and lean frame, one could see why one of his friends referred to him as “an emaciated Charlton Heston.” So striking was his physical appearance that when he entered the room or merely paused before speaking, we found ourselves leaning forward in anticipation.

When Truman began to speak, we became aware of his mellifluous voice. It was pleasing and seemed to resound from his whole body. He was a master of vocal expression. Merely by inflection, he could present, promote, question, or forcefully drive home a point. His diction was measured, often cadenced, and was always precise. He had a gift for language and verbal expression.

In his Book of Mormon class, Truman introduced us afresh to Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Although most of us had been taught the basic insights of the restoration before coming to BYU, Truman had a way of placing gospel subjects in a new, and for us more interesting, light. Like the diamond cutter

who turns and facets his gems to reflect maximum light, so, too, did Truman approach fundamental topics in ways that allowed the light of the restored gospel to be more fully exposed and appreciated. When, for example, we read in Alma 38:12, “bridle all your passions,” Truman helped us to see in the nuances of that phrase the difference that a restored knowledge of an embodied God could have on theology, religion, and the joys of marriage, hearth, and home.

We appreciated Truman’s pedagogical skills. Because he had an unusual ability to understand what was happening inside his students’ heads, he knew what to do to make his lectures clear and interesting. Because the subject matters he introduced were often new to us, he took the time to lay the proper foundation of definitions—introducing the new in terms of the old, the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. He also used internal summaries and advanced organizers to telegraph the scope and sequence of his lessons. If we did not understand a point, we could interrupt at any moment and ask questions. Even the most ill-conceived questions received respectful answers. Sometimes, to help us get a feeling for the personalities of those involved, Truman would enact his impressions, or imitations, of them. I can still hear Truman’s impression of his teacher Paul Tillich’s guttural voice and German accent in referring to God as the “ultimate ground of Being.”

Although Truman’s technical gifts were well deployed, we learned that they were mere accompaniments to a deep mastery of his subject matter and the testimony of the Spirit that made his lessons vital and life changing. In meekness and with appreciation, Truman showed us some of the “crown jewels” of the Mormon heritage.

Although we profited from the doctrinal and theological discussions of our faith, we appreciated also Truman’s willingness to share personal stories that added interest to his presentations and drove home important points. I learned about these in my introduction to the Book of Mormon and introduction to philosophy classes, somewhere between the Psalm of Nephi and Friederich Waisman’s *On Verifiability*. Sharing these stories made Truman human. His sharing them with us made us feel as if we were his friends, if not his intimates.

The confidentiality of friends is precisely what Truman drew us into. He took us to his home, apologized for the spare furnishings, showed us the stereo system purchased in lieu of furniture, shared his prized recordings, engaged us in the discussion of inspiring topics, and served us Sister Madsen’s refreshments. The confidentiality of friends was also the basis of his presentations to us. He spoke to us not as a pedant or know-it-all, but as a brother and friend who respected us as his friends. Although he himself thrived on the subtle and abstract nature of philosophical and theological arcana, he never spoke down to us. He made us each feel that we were colleagues capable of joining him on the academic mountain.

So engaging was his teaching that we often lost track of time and space. When the bell rang, we would be startled that the hour had gone by so quickly. But in spite of the seeming shortness of the hour, our memories contained many of the insights, the lecture content, the stories, the anecdotes, and the feelings that we still remember decades later. Of all my memories, two reminiscences dominate: the love and respect that Truman had for Joseph Smith, and the way our hearts burned within us when he testified of the truthfulness of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. When Truman spoke about these subjects, he had what Arthur Henry King called a “Scandinavian pellucidity.” I thought that I could see a light emanating from his face, almost making his bones visible. The way we felt during those times is one reason that we have gone to hear him again and again during the intervening years.

Truman’s Contribution as a Teacher

Truman's Impact on Me

Most teachers aspire to make a difference in the lives of their students; Truman has been more successful than most. My own life is representative. As I look back with the 20/20 vision of hindsight, it is clear that Truman's impact upon me has been immense, affecting the quality of all my days in the forty years since I first met him. The way in which I see the world bears his influence, not just in my own work in educational psychology, but also in my philosophical foundations.

Truman helped us know our religion. He introduced us to the theological and philosophical underpinnings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Because of our respect for his competence and character, we were not afraid that our explorations would lead us out of the church or of religion. "If Truman with all his knowledge can still believe, then we, who will probably never know as much, need not fear," we thought.

Truman introduced us to the world of ideas. Our explorations of philosophy with him as our guide were exhilarating. His Socratic approach found a responsive chord in us. From him, we received our first inklings of the history of ideas and the types and problems of philosophy. Who was Plato's Socrates and what has been his influence on Western civilization? What were the contributions of Aristotle? How did St. Augustine platonize the theology of the Christian church? How did St. Thomas Aquinas aristotelianize it? How did William James distinguish the mystical from the ordinarily religious? How might we evaluate Cardinal Newman's claim that faith was a descant upon doubt? My first encounter with questions like these came in Truman's classes. Jack Welch, one of his students-become-colleague, wrote down a typical Madsen statement: "Kierkegaard gave us an either/or. Joseph Smith gave us a both/and."

Truman taught us lessons that we could expand beyond the classroom. When we wrote student papers, he taught us to look deeper than the easy answer and to think beyond the cut-and-dried. The themes he addressed in class were dynamic and growing. Because he did not prematurely bring closure to his discussion of topics, we found it easy to extend his lessons as we learned more. We learned to love the things he loved. Most of us have spent the rest of our lives learning more about them and sharing them with others.

Truman introduced us to other teachers and sources of help. He did this by freely and frequently expressing his admiration for other scholars in the field and related fields. He often spoke of modern philosophers like Paul Tillich (the subject of his Harvard dissertation), William James (the subject of his master's thesis at the University of Utah and of his F. C. S. Schiller Essay Contest prize at the University of Southern California), Maurice Merleau Ponty, and Willard Van Orman Quine. He also mentioned the work of contemporary Latter-day Saint scholars like Chauncey Riddle, Hugh Nibley, Wes Belnap, David Yarn, Daniel Ludlow, Richard Anderson, and Spencer Palmer. Although he did not always agree with his former teachers at the University of Utah and Harvard, his respect for them was clearly evident. These informal, offhand introductions gave us the names of those who could guide us in further expansions of the topics we first encountered in his classes.

Truman's Impact on Those He Mentored

In addition to the thousands—more accurately, hundreds of thousands—of students whom he taught in the classroom or who heard him speak, Truman has had a decisive influence on those students for whom he became a personal mentor or advisor. Some to whom he was a mentor have since become his colleagues in the Philosophy Department and Religious Studies Department. These students have long been Truman's protégés and colleagues

by affection. To name only a few, both Terry and Susan Warner and Noel and Sydney Reynolds had wedding receptions at the Madsens' home. Dennis Rasmussen was one of the Madsens' missionary sons. S. Kent Brown now serves as one of Truman's colleagues in biblical studies.

Truman's Impact on BYU

Truman's teaching, recruitment, mentoring, and encouragement of students played a key role in the historical development of BYU. Today, competition among students to get into BYU is intense, and investments in faculty and the physical plant have allowed BYU to take its place among modern universities. It was different when the Madsens first came to BYU.

Truman began his teaching career at BYU in 1957 as an assistant professor in the Department of Religion, which then included philosophy. One marvels at the weekly schedule of the young faculty member. On weekdays, he would prepare and teach an average of three or four classes in religion and philosophy, conduct research, and write articles. On weekends and some weekday evenings, he would serve as bishop of the BYU 11th Ward, supervising ward activities and counseling members until late in the evening. (English professor Don Norton and I still remember the young bishop pulling up to the Joseph Smith Building in his overloaded Volkswagen, with members of his 11th Ward flock literally hanging out the windows.)

Often on Friday afternoons, when his classes were over, he would drive with colleagues like Stephen Covey, Lynn McKinlay, Robert Thomas, and Reed Bradford to stake centers in places like Reno, Oakland, Los Angeles, or Portland, where they would present Know Your Religion or Education Week programs. Richard Henstrom, who directed BYU's Know Your Religion programs for many years, told me that many parents who heard Truman and his colleagues at Know Your Religion firesides decided to send their children to BYU to be educated under "teachers like these." Quietly and without fanfare, the demand to be educated at BYU is growing, not only in the number of students who seek admission but also in their quality and serious intent. Brother Madsen, as a practitioner of excellence and one of the dedicated faculty who were willing to travel to the ends of the earth to help the Saints "know their religion," was a leader in the intramural and extramural building of the modern BYU.

Truman's Impact as an Emissary of the Church and BYU

One who thinks that Truman's outreach has been of prime importance is Hugh Nibley. In his letter to Truman on Truman's seventieth birthday, he asks,

How do I know thee? Let me count the ways. That is easy, because there is only one—as an emissary of the gospel. Truman is less like anybody else than anybody else is. He defies classification. My favorite orator in these drab days: cool, precise, but punchier than a pile driver when he wants to be.

Who else could have brought a dozen world-famous Jewish and gentile scholars to Provo, corralled them into a snowbound cabin and made them talk, without a knife, gun, or glowing cigarette? May I remind you that these guys were Number One, top-drawer in their fields.

[Truman is] . . . a diplomat as shrewd as Talleyrand but obvious as a child, boldly giving away his secret plans and desires, which are simply to advance the Kingdom of God on earth with whatever will do it.

Truman leaves his mark in the bemused minds of those intellectuals whom he does not hesitate to challenge. He has a casual approach, like an intellectual Jacob Hamblin (and Jacob was no slouch), sizing

up suspicious and wary gentiles and bringing them around with a forceful and sometimes subtle persuasion. He defies criticism because he defies classification. He would be perfectly at home in a frontiersman's leather jacket or a cummerbund with banks of medals and orders—trivia to him, but filling a purpose—the Kingdom, always the Kingdom. I wonder if he ever thinks of anything else.

Truman has a way of turning up out of nowhere, suddenly standing at one's elbow or gazing down from the stand. Like the Three Nephites, the Wandering Jew, and President Hinckley, he is meant to circulate among mankind, in all things, through all things, and about all things.

It is an impertinence to try to pin down such a character; it can't be done. But wherever you may find him, in celestial orbit or brief overnight abode, you can be sure that the work of the Lord is going on. Long may he elude, delight, and inspire us.

Nibley's salutation—one Latter-day Saint treasure saluting another—was never intended for public circulation, but I have asked for permission to print it here, because it serves to epitomize Truman's contributions as an emissary.

New England Mission

In 1962, when Truman was thirty-five, the sphere of his teaching contributions was broadened by a call to serve as the president of the New England Mission of the church, headquartered in Cambridge, Massachusetts. While still raising their young family, the Madsens adopted hundreds of missionary sons and daughters as part of their circle of concern. Because Truman had received a Harvard Ph.D. in philosophy and religion, many doors were opened and invitations issued that would otherwise have been withheld. The young mission president grew in his ability to articulate and compare the message of the restoration with other faiths and philosophies.

More Distinctions

When the Madsens returned to BYU at the end of their mission, the students and faculty of BYU showed their appreciation of Truman's teaching by formal awards. In 1966, students in the Honors Program voted Truman Honors Professor of the Year. The next year, in 1967, his faculty colleagues awarded him the Karl G. Maeser Distinguished Teaching Award, and in 1972, the Associated Students named him Professor of the Year. In 1972, he was appointed director of Judeo-Christian Studies in BYU's Religious Studies Center and director of the Institute of Mormon Studies.

The Richard L. Evans Chair

In 1972, Truman's role as a bridge builder was formalized when he became the first occupant of the Richard L. Evans Chair. Jointly sponsored by an independent foundation and the university, it was designed for "two-way exchange" in comparative religion. As other groups (such as the Kennedy Center, of which Truman was a fellow) became involved, it developed into an intercultural, interdisciplinary effort. The chair sponsored programs in colleges and civic organizations, underwriting symposia, interfaith conferences, seminars, and workshops. It brought more than a hundred distinguished scholars to campus for special lectures and discussion. For Truman, over two decades, the assignment meant hundreds of trips to educational institutions in almost every state of the United States and on the European continent. In addition, it meant forty-five travel-study trips to Israel, three years as "commuting professor" at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, and one as guest professor at Haifa University. Truman, as teacher, was participant, moderator, contributor, and facilitator.

I personally witnessed Truman in action in his Evans Chair role when he came to Stanford University to speak in Stanford Memorial Chapel. There, he engaged our Dean of the Chapel, Robert Hamerton-Kelly, and other campus divines in a discussion of “images of God.” As one might imagine, the discussion proceeded at a high level of sophistication, with each speaker in turn offering up a different image of God. When it was Truman’s turn to speak, he acknowledged the several contributions of the panelists and then began to teach the Mormon doctrine of deity to those on the panel and those assembled *in their own theologico-philosophical tongue*. When he finished, I thought I could see on the faces of those assembled the respect they had for Professor Madsen, for his cogent comments, and for the Mormon religion he represented. Among those who applauded most warmly were students from the Stanford 1st and 3rd Wards, who saw in Brother Madsen’s performance a vindication of their faith.

Multiply this example by more than a hundred universities across the world and we begin to grasp the range of Truman’s role as an emissary. In most cases, Truman traveled by himself to bear witness and spread understanding of the restoration. Although it is difficult to quantify the number of those who came to believe or respect the distinctions of Mormonism, the effect of Truman’s teaching was perhaps epitomized by a Scandinavian scholar who was apprehensive that Truman would simply evangelize for his own faith. Erlend Peterson, now vice-president of international relations for BYU, arranged the meeting in Oslo. Peterson recalls that Truman first outlined the philosophical beliefs of the Neoplatonists and traced their influence on historical Christianity. He then showed how the theological framework of the dominant wings of Christianity was more like the tenets of Neoplatonism than the sayings of Jesus. He concluded by testifying that unlike many modern Christian churches, his own church had returned to the categories of the New Testament. After Truman had spoken, his host said, “I see that Professor Madsen is a very dangerous man. He could almost persuade me to become a Mormon.” (The professor, Guttorm Fløistad, has written an article in this Festschrift).

Director of the Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies

In 1991, while still pursuing the mission of the Evans Chair, Truman was appointed director of the BYU Jerusalem Center. In this chapter of Truman’s and Ann’s life, they wrote their message in the hearts of Jewish and Arab citizens of the Holy Land, who in turn inscribed their affection in the hearts of the Madsens. In their directing role, the Madsens also served as hosts to many church members who visited the Jerusalem Center as students or as tourists.

Truman continued in his formal role as emissary until his retirement from BYU in 1994, at which time he became a professor emeritus. Upon “retirement” and in recognition of his lifetime contributions to the university as teacher, scholar, and citizen, Truman was invited to address those in attendance at the BYU spring commencement exercises, an honor accorded to only a handful of faculty in the history of the university.

Influencing a Multitude

Through the years, Truman’s teaching created a demand among many who voted with their feet to hear him teach again and again. As the numbers of these students multiplied, so did the demand for his books, his articles, and tape recordings of his lectures. I saw this phenomenon firsthand when my wife, Jeanne, served as chair of the BYU Women’s Conference sponsored by the university and the Relief Society. When planning for most speakers, rooms of conventional size were adequate. When planning for Truman, the Marriott Center was often used.

In preparing this tribute, I asked the BYU Office of Institutional Assessment to estimate the number of students that a typical BYU professor might expect to teach in a thirty-seven-year career. Their estimate was between 7,000 and 18,500 students, depending on class load and students per class. Truman taught a full quota of students

in his classes in the religion and philosophy departments, but in addition, he taught—by my estimate—approximately 300,000 to 400,000 additional students. These were students who came to BYU Education Weeks, Know Your Religion series, panels, symposia, institutes, and invited addresses to members of the church and members of other faiths and cultures. Also included would be those students who did not hear him in person but became acquainted with his teaching through transcripts and audio recordings of his lectures.

This difference between an average of, say, 15,000 in a typical career and 400,000 in Truman's career tells us a lot about the influence of Truman's teaching. Not only did he teach many students, but he taught many different kinds of students, of all ages and backgrounds. Thousands of individuals from many different parts of the world elected to hear Truman again and again—often in the face of competitive attractions. This is one dimension in which Truman's teaching is unique, perhaps inimitable.

Still to be acknowledged, but more difficult to estimate, is his indirect influence on the families and associates of his students. Who knows how many people now speak of “eternal man,” “the highest in us,” and the many contributions of the Prophet Joseph Smith without attributing credit to Brother Madsen as the conduit through which the ideas were initially presented to them?

The Qualities of a Gospel Messenger

Herbert Walberg, in a synthesis in the *Handbook of Research on Teaching* published by the American Educational Research Association in 1986, summarized several decades of research on excellence in teaching by identifying eight dimensions of teaching which studies have found to be highly correlated with positive results. These traits include the teacher's clarity, flexibility, enthusiasm, task orientation, use of student ideas, indirectness, structuring, and sparing use of criticism.¹ Truman scores high on these traditional variables.

An Example of Truman's Teaching

On 13 March 2001, I invited Truman to speak as a guest lecturer in my experimental general education class. I wanted my students to have a taste of what I had enjoyed when Truman was my teacher. Because I wanted them also to be drawn, as my associates and I had been, into the confidentiality of friends, I asked Truman to speak autobiographically about themes from his book *The Highest in Us*. This book begins with an account of the conversion of Lorenzo Snow, and thus Truman made frequent references to him in this presentation. With the exception of the citation near the end from Emmeline B. Wells, Truman spoke from memory without notes during the entire ninety minutes.

The excerpts which follow exemplify what I have said about Truman's teaching. Although more autobiographical than most, these informal remarks typify much of Truman's classroom teaching. They show the narrative or storylike quality of Truman's discourse, which is so helpful for memory, visualization, and recall. They illustrate the order of his presentation of ideas, each idea proceeding in a natural and logical order, interspersed with parenthetical material that enlivens the discourse and intensifies interest. We see Truman progressively revealing new aspects of his subject matter to lift and inspire his audience, showing in the example of his own lived experience the power of the restored gospel to change a life and a career.

I find these excerpts to be precious because of what they reveal about a man who, at my request, was willing to open his heart. The excerpts which follow throw light on key turning points in Truman's life, turning points which are not illumined elsewhere in print. One can see in Truman's narrative how, line upon line and precept upon precept, Truman came to the insights in *The Highest in Us*. As you read what follows, please remember that Truman is speaking informally and that my transcript only imperfectly captures the real thing. Lost is all of the expressive information of Truman's voice, his face, and his body language.

Madsen on *The Highest in Us*

Why did you write a book on memory?

You will see. I was born into a family of three boys. I was number two. When my younger brother was born, my mother lasted about a month and then because of a condition that could have been reversed with a shot of penicillin, which wasn't available then, she passed away. I was then two and a half and have no memory—I put that in italics—*no memory* of her. My earliest memory was in the home of an aunt, a marvelous woman who tried to fill the breach. All my life I have wanted two things: to find a way through memory study to go back earlier and to come to understand what might have been a relationship prior to mortality. So if you've looked at some of the things I've written or said, you'll find a preoccupation with the premortal life.

The phrase you sang today from "O My Father": "I had learned to call thee Father through thy spirit from on high"—the way you saw it on the screen today, "spirit" has a small s. That may or may not be the way it was originally written. Eliza R. Snow, of course, had in mind *the Spirit*, with a capital S. But there's another sense in which she believed, as did her brother Lorenzo, that the spirit, the individual spirit locked within us, does carry, though under amnesia, the record of our former life, and that the Lord ordains that, as we honor the deepest of those impulses in response to the realities of this world, some of those memories are brought back to us. We have at least flashes or glimpses, and they are in me a most powerful motivational force.

Occasionally I have probed the life of Orson F. Whitney. This man, almost forgotten now, a member of the Twelve—some spoke of him as the Milton of Mormonism—wrote a classic poem called "Elias." I learned, while in Israel with President Hugh B. Brown, the following quick glimpse. He, Elder Hugh B. Brown, was walking down a street in Salt Lake. It's a steep hill, Third Avenue, close to what we used to call Memory Grove—interesting in the present context. As he walked, he saw another man walking toward him. He thought he recognized him, but he didn't know him. But there was a sense that he did. "When we were side by side," he told me, "it was almost as if I felt an electric shock. We both took a few steps, stopped, turned around and stared at each other, and then walked on without a word. I learned later that he was Orson F. Whitney, a member of the Council of the Twelve. I am now a member of the Council of the Twelve, and I am assured we knew each other before."

Well, it was Orson F. Whitney who wrote an article we call now "Spirit Memories." If you want to see the response of President Joseph F. Smith to his reflections, it's on page thirteen of *Gospel Doctrine*.

Why did you end up coming to Brigham Young University when you said that you never would?

You want to be careful about telling the Lord what you won't do. I can't explain now why we were set against it, but both Ann and I were sure that once I had a degree we would look for some place in the East. For example, I would have loved to teach at Amherst, Massachusetts, and have Ann study Emily Dickinson in a wonderful college town. But we were rigidly opposed to going to BYU. One night we both sat up in bed and said, "Guess what! We're supposed to go to BYU."

I've often said in retrospect that we don't ever get—at least I haven't—a life blueprint, a total blueprint of outcomes. In some ways we can be grateful for that. But all I have received, and I'm most grateful, is at certain turning points a nudge and then, in retrospect, looking back, have been able to say, "Oh, that makes sense. That makes sense. That's the way it's supposed to be."

People say, "Well, the Lord really isn't interested in such decisions as your vocation or even your marriage. That's your business. He'll back you up as long as you live the basic principles of the gospel and live a meaningful life. You shouldn't put the burden on him." But I give you my personal experience that that's a little too hasty and superficial. I think the Lord knows us better than we know ourselves. I think that he knows something about why we are here now and not some other time or place and that we ought to seek his guidance, even if it's very difficult at times to receive and recognize.

So we came here, and in the "looking-back" feeling, we have no regrets. None.

Why did you focus so much in your writing on the nature of man and then tie that, as you frequently do, to the ultimate nature of God?

In my book I write of an exchange that occurred in Worcester, Massachusetts, at Holy Cross University—a collision between the Mormon understanding of a personal God in whose image we are and the classical traditional view that God, to be God, must be described, if at all, in the ultimate categories of Greek philosophy. I still remember somebody standing up and reeling off the negative theology: "God is not anything like man. Beyond space, beyond time, beyond everything."

I remember saying, "You have just given me a catalogue of Plato-tudes. But let me ask questions about Christ. Was Christ a person?" Yes. "Was he somewhere between, say, five and seven feet tall?" Yes, he was. "Did he have a body?" Yes. "Will he always have a body?" Yes. "Is there any reason why we cannot honor and admire and even worship him in his present glorified condition as a person?" No. All right, then, back to the Father. "What about the Father?" Oh, no, no, no. And then they gave me the same list. I couldn't resist saying, "You've been saying that Mormons aren't really monotheists. They are polytheists. And I ask you the question: "Don't you have two Gods, totally different Gods? Haven't you created for me a hard problem in prayer and worship? How can I honor Christ and try to be Christlike when it will mean that I am becoming totally *unlike* God, who is so much beyond?"

He said, "You don't understand the Trinity." I had studied Augustine at Harvard, and I admit I didn't understand. I passed the exam, but I don't think Augustine himself understood the Trinity. Trinitarianism is a series of paradoxes and contradictions. The impact on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam of that view of the ultimate first cause in Aristotle or ultimate being in Plato was a very unfortunate wedding, and it took a boy—a fourteen-year-old boy—to say, "The emperor has no clothes!" Or, to reverse the metaphor, "The emperor has been smothered under the Greek clothing."

Lorenzo Snow had it given to him in power, as if a conduit had opened between him and heaven, that just as an earthly father and mother have children who inherit their very nature, so do we inherit ours from God. I tell you from much experience and travel that we are among the few who take that seriously. I studied under Paul Tillich. The ultimate position of Paul Tillich is that God is—as he put it with a capital *B* and a capital *I*—"Being Itself" and that God is absolutely not a person, period. The boy Joseph learned otherwise, and so did Lorenzo Snow. They gave their lives to try to communicate that glorious principle. It doesn't seem glorious to others. It seems blasphemous, it seems inferior, it seems crude. Isn't that an interesting inversion?

We held in Jerusalem a council, as it were, of world-renowned theologians. We decided to call it “The Search for Human Nature.” There were representatives of Roman Catholicism, Greek Orthodoxy, Protestantism, three different Jewish points of view, and a man who was an expert on oriental religions. At the end we had an opportunity to talk about the Latter-day Saint understanding.

Listening to the alternatives, I came to understand what a brilliant philosopher once said to me: “You Mormons have the gospel that’s *really good news!*” He was saying that we have dropped, like a clod of mud, a series of hopelessly misleading premises. We don’t have to work with them anymore. There is no such thing, for example, as an *ex nihilo* creation. There simply isn’t. You cannot bring something out of nothing. We drop once and for all the dogma of original sin—that somehow Adam and Eve committed a horrible, totally defiling transgression that ruined the future of all the human family. “If only they had not done that, we could all be in Paradise.” That’s the view, and then it gets compounded in Calvin with the notion of utter and total depravity. This premise is introduced in order to justify perfect honor for God. You are a worm, but God will save you in spite of your worminess, and that is called grace.

Now, we understand grace profoundly in the church, but what we don’t accept is the notion that there is nothing of worth in you. Your spirit self and the intelligence that’s part of it are altogether good. And your present body is not totally depraved. If you misuse it and pervert it, you can eventually become what you shouldn’t have become. But that will be against your basic nature. The Book of Mormon talks a good deal about “the natural man,” but it is not talking about original sin. It’s talking about something else, and I won’t take time to elaborate now. My point is that the gospel is really good news. You are somebody in the eyes of God, and that is because you partake of his very nature.

Lorenzo Snow saw that. One day he was here in what was then the academy, BYU Academy. There was a mirror through which he could see the children who were playing, but they could not see back to him, and he noticed that they were working with clay and were forming round balls which he thought for the moment they might be using for playthings. Instead, they were making clay earths. Lorenzo Snow began to weep. “Why?” someone asked him. He said, “Those children do not know that in due time they may actually make worlds.” That’s how literal he was about the power that resides in our potential to become.

How, Truman, did you end up focusing on teaching as much as on writing?

In a successful academic career those should, of course, be combined. BYU, as an undergraduate institution, puts tremendous emphasis on teaching. I hope they continue to do so. We do not have the greatest graduate schools in the world, although some are measurably impressive.

I had a set of crises. I had to come home and have major back surgery just on the eve of undertaking my dissertation, and I had to take my final written exams when I had excruciating sciatic pain. My wife was expecting our second child. Her father was dying of cancer. I was in no sense secure in the feeling that I would finish at Harvard.

In that crisis hour, a concerned aunt, the one who took me in as a babe, called one of the Brethren [Elder Harold B. Lee] and said, “Please give Truman Madsen a blessing.” He came, knocked on the door, and said, “I came to give you a blessing.” He pulled me out of that struggle. One key phrase and answer to the question I asked was, “You will be a valued teacher.” I have tried.

How have you dealt with other struggles and setbacks and tragedies?

We all have them. Again, I invoke Brother Lorenzo. He was present in the incredible and glorious outpourings of the Kirtland Temple. They thought, as I have written, that the Millennium had come. They had no disposition even for their former habits or sins. “This must be the Millennium.”

The Prophet had to alert them, “Yes, it’s beautiful, but it’s all to prepare us. Get ready, brethren, because the opposite will come.” And of course it did. He also said—which I find hard—“God will feel after you, and he will wrench your very heartstrings. And if you cannot stand it, you will not be worthy of the kingdom of God.” With that as a premise, I’ve gone through our history and many of the lives of our great men and women. I can find a wrench—at least one—in every life I study. There have been a few in mine.

Ann bore three marvelous children, but we hoped for more. So, as a family, we had periodic fasting and praying for about twenty-five years. Occasionally, we would overhear Latter-day Saints, not wanting to be thoughtless, say, “I wonder why the Madsens don’t have any more children.” Well, so did we. In the letters we wrote to each other, wherever we were in the world, there was a final salutation, which was “Keep the baby faith!” If we are at peace now about it—and we are, both of us—it is partly because we came to recognize that we were to reach out to others not born to us but who were nevertheless part of our larger family in the real world.

You all know Hugh Nibley. I was in the auditorium the night they presented as kind of a premiere the videotape on his life called “The Faith of an Observer.” At the end of their interviewing him in Egypt, he, sitting on the hot desert sands and unaware that the camera was rolling, told this midrash about Abraham. On just such a day, he is looking out of his tent, a day which they describe as the very belching of hell, so hot that you can see thermals in every direction. Abraham is worried. Somebody may be out there in that torrid heat. So he sends his trusted servant, Eliezer, to go out and look in every direction to see if anybody is faltering. He comes back and says, “No one. I found no one.” But the Jews have a saying that sometimes a servant cannot be trusted to do a hard task. So Abraham, though aged and infirm himself, goes out in the heat in every direction. He finds no one.

But when he returns to that tent three persons are standing there—angels, and in one case perhaps the Lord himself. They promise him what he has wanted all his life—a son. And a son he had. Jewish lore says that Sarah was not only beyond the child-bearing years, but one account says that she didn’t even have a womb, so it was a total miracle for her to deliver a child. But the lovely legend is that when she did, every line in her face disappeared, and that from then on, when she was asked, “How old are you?” she replied, “The same age as my son. My life began when he was born.”

If I had time, I would dwell on what all that meant for the later sacrifice required of Abraham and Sarah. But as it applies to me and to you, I believe that sooner or later the Lord feels after us to the very place and point that we are most resistant to him and asks us to give the last thing we want to give. Sometimes he takes it. Sometimes he simply says your willingness is enough.

This is also subjective, and I hope I am not betraying a confidence. I sat in the Jerusalem Center one night on New Year’s Eve as Robert Cundick played “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring” on the organ. Elder James E. Faust, not then of the First Presidency, and Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, not then of the Twelve, were sitting in the comparative darkness looking out at the vista that is, if tradition is right, Mount Moriah. Elder Faust turned to Elder Holland and said, “Talk about Abraham.” And, as if he was given a cue, Elder Holland launched eloquently, as only he can, into the point that Abraham came to that mount with his son. And his son was delivered from sacrifice by a ram in a thicket. But the Son of God ascended the same mount. And he *was* the ram, the Lamb. He was not delivered. He participated, gave, suffered, sacrificed.

Tests come in two ways: One is the ultimate extremity when, yes, the only way out is death—if you want to honor your covenants. But the other is to live your whole life as a genuine, put-on-the-altar sacrifice, your will swallowed up in his. That's Christlike.

Lorenzo Snow understood that. He used to say to the Saints, "It's going to be rough. But it won't be as rough—it will smooth things out—if you will totally live the commandments."

Why have you emphasized the temple so much in your teaching and writing?

Soon after my mission I was called to the Ensign Stake Temple Committee. As a result, I was on a monthly schedule of meetings, and I had to go to the temple every Friday night. Within a short time it began to sink in. I think I've read everything that's ever been written in terms of the basic arguments against temple ordinances or the Mormon practices. They fly off like so much water off a duck's back. I know the contrary is true.

Some of you heard me tell of being in California, and down comes President McKay to ask for the one million dollars that the local Saints were to raise in order to build the Los Angeles Temple. How I got in that meeting I don't know. I had no official calling. But at the end of their commitment he gave what I consider one of the finest, clearest talks ever on "why temples?"

That's the origin of the quotation I wrote down in shorthand and which I have memorized: "Brothers and sisters, I believe there are few"—I am quoting—"even [among] temple workers who understand the full meaning and power of the temple endowment. Seen for what it is, it is the step-by-step ascent into the eternal presence. If our young people could but glimpse it, it would be the most powerful spiritual motivation of their lives." That enhanced, for me, the temple odyssey.

One night I was so close to Brother Nibley in the seating of the Provo Temple that I could make out his profile. And it was obvious that he was totally absorbed in listening, wholeheartedly and wholeheartedly. Downstairs in the locker room I made bold to say, "Brother Nibley, what was going on in that mind of yours? You could do the temple ceremony in your sleep! You know it backwards and forwards. You have been studying world ritual for fifty years, and yet you were right on the edge of your chair."

He said, "Well, I always come to the temple with a theme in mind."

That was new to me, and I said, "Like what?"

"Well, tonight it was beauty. And I made several wonderful discoveries."

The next time, I went with that in mind, and yes, indeed, I found some wonderful things. I wish I had his whole list. But here is a man who has taught me that as far back as Egypt and earlier, there was at least a semblance of imitation of a complete and comprehensive ritual process that was, they understood, to lead us back to the very presence of God.

I have been asked, "Why isn't more said about Jesus in the temple?" It's like saying, "Why isn't Christ ever mentioned in the New Testament?" Jesus is everywhere in the temple. Every symbol, every statement ultimately ties back to him. The ultimate culmination is a tie to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is in the exact image of the Father. So I would say in one sentence that, for me, the temple has brought meaning and power and purification into my life by binding me to the power of Christ's atonement. That is where the atonement is written in our flesh.

I had the privilege of witnessing the conversion of a Congregational minister who, after his one-year waiting period, had the experience of the temple. Because of Protestant leanings and some unfortunate experiences with other kinds of ritual—fraternal ritual—he was not only *not* helped or inspired by the process, but he was turned off. He decided he would tell no one, and he could go on being a good Latter-day Saint. He just wouldn't be a temple-going Latter-day Saint.

One Sunday a discerning woman cornered him. “John,” she said, “how do you feel about the temple?”

“Oh, all right, I guess.”

“John, how do you really feel about the temple?”

“Well, I had some problems.”

“I thought so. Come with me.” She took him home and introduced him to her husband, who had had a similar experience but who now was totally dedicated to the process. (John had talked indirectly to others, including me, about his problem quietly; and he summed it up by saying, “I love you, but you didn't help me. You didn't help me. But he did.”)

“Oh, what did he say?”

Now, it may not mean anything to those of you who have been and are yet to go, but what he said was basically this: “It is one thing, John, to have intellectual understanding, conceptual grasp, of principles. It is something else to have it written in your flesh. The temple writes it in your flesh.” Somehow that broke the dam, and John became zealous to his last breath.

As Nibley says, “The temple is designed”—this is his summary phrase—“to reverse the blows of death.” And that includes sin. Sin is always death-bringing, even if you only die a little. There are deaths *in* the body—as we somehow diminish light in the head, somehow diminish the sensitivity of our hearts, somehow even betray the creative and procreative powers we have. That's a form of death. The death of the body is the one we are all worried about, but we are worried falsely. That's not what we should focus on. It's avoiding the deaths that sin brings—that is what the temple reverses, cleanses, purifies, purges, heals. Why? Because it is the power of Jesus Christ, called “the power of godliness” (D&C 84:20, 21).

How did you get started with—some say your preoccupation, some say your obsession—with Joseph Smith? You just can't leave him alone. You go on reading about him, you go on studying—all his teachings, line by line, and then his life. Surely there are others to study.

Oh, yes, lots of others, but yes, since day one—what day was that? I am going to tell you—it has been Joseph Smith. Part of that again is very, very personal. When I was only a nineteen-year-old and a very young one, the bishop walked into my house and called my brother on a mission. He had just come out of the air corps after the Second World War (he was a couple of years older). He was on the verge of a business proposition that was to be consummated the next day. He said, “Bishop, as far as I am concerned, you couldn't have come on a worse night. The fact that you're here shows that I'm wrong, so the answer is yes, I'll go.”

I remember walking to the back room of the house, saying to myself, “My own brother is going on a mission. That gives me only two years. I'd better get serious about the scriptures.” (I had a mandate in my patriarchal blessing,

“Master the scriptures.” I’ve tried.) I felt totally inadequate.

The next week the bishop came back to our house and said, “We’ve been talking it over and we’ve prayed about it. We’d like to call you too, Truman, and we’ll have a joint farewell.”

“You what?”

“We will have a joint farewell for you and your brother.”

Instead of demonstrating my brother’s faith, I said, “Oh, bishop, not so soon, not so soon.” I really fought it. Eventually I came around, and we did indeed have a joint farewell. We went to the then-MTC—it was the so-called mission home in Salt Lake City—and we went to serve in New England.

The mission president wisely never made us companions. That would not have been good chemistry. He knew it. I was still insecure and needed to make my own way. I had begged him to let me stay three extra months. He wrote me a letter and said, “Your brother is going to pick you up in May. He will be released. You will not. He will take you to the birthplace of Joseph Smith.”

We, having tried to serve, stood near the thirty-eight-and-a-half-foot shaft. Sunset. Three hundred sixty degrees of greenery. And I still remember his looking up and saying, “I love you, Joseph Smith.”

Now, we didn’t know that he would come home, marry, have two little children, be summoned by the National Guard to serve in Korea, and, on his eighty-second mission, crash and not come home. I thank God I had the shared experience with him before his death. Part of my concern to honor and study the Prophet comes out of that one climactic afternoon.

Another part is hard to put into words, so I am going to use somebody else’s. I wrote a book on B. H. Roberts, one of our best historians and doctrinal writers in the first hundred years, and certainly the most comprehensive. He was asked to give a tribute to a famous Latter-day Saint woman who was known all over the church as Aunt Em—Emmeline B. Wells. She was wife to Daniel H. Wells.

“Someday,” she wrote, “and sometime, if I should live on”—she was then 82—“I may converse with you as I only do to a few choice souls. Not that I can give you new thoughts—you get those from the depths that are found in your own heart—but to exchange or interchange thoughts with one of superior intelligence is a luxury in this barren world of cold communication.” She’s not talking about IQ. She’s talking about intelligence in the Lord’s definition.

“When I recall”—now listen—“as I sometimes do, if I ever have time to think of the past, the spiritual converse of a few intimate friends of the Prophet Joseph, I marvel at how I have lived all these later years without now and then drinking at the fountain of that inspiration that seemed to fathom the depths of eternal wisdom and with a grace so modest, yet so sublime, that one sat, as it were, entranced, listening as one would to music of celestial beings. I wonder if you will comprehend me, but you who have studied the Prophet deeply must know that the men and women who sat with him partook more or less of that spirit of eternal truth. And it lingered with them while they lived [they are all gone now] and we only dream of them and fancy their influence lingers near and plod on among the other wanderers, and now and then we get a germ of finer thought from those we meet on life’s journey. And in humility and obedience we surrender our own will to his who sees not as man sees.”

I have a testimony that that is true. And I wasn't there. I'm a secondhand witness. Emmeline poured that testimony into her children. My own grandfather sat entranced day after day in the old Lion House in the presence of Eliza R. Snow, who, next to his mother, was the most profound influence in teaching him that Joseph Smith was the grandest man that ever lived, with the exception only of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you think the church—and the modern restoration movement—needs “intellectuals” in the world’s definition, and do you consider yourself an “intellectual”?

I've been asked that in various ways—some courteous and some not. I am only one more ordinary man. Any ascription to me of unusual brain power or anything like it is not really true. To be honest with you, in English classes at the high school I attended, they did an IQ test, and I never found out the results. I didn't want to know. I was terrified to find out. The only clue I ever had that I might have been a little ahead is that my teacher finally said, “You're not taking a sufficient load in school, young man. You are not doing justice to your own potential.”

The point is, whatever I can give you in the way of credentials, even the things that Dillon has said about merciful students who gave me awards, doesn't prove anything. I believe that when the Lord said, “The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth” (D&C 93:36), that is not synonymous with saying, “Or, in other words, a Ph.D. from Chicago or Harvard or Stanford.” There is something about our individual spirit and its communion directly with *the* spirit of God that is the ultimate teaching process and the source of genuine learning and intelligence.

Yes, there are skills and talents, I have no doubt. And they are needed. And whatever your own discovery of your aptitudes may be, I pray that you will take that as a gift and magnify it.

My answer to this question about intellectuals is that the church needs all of us at our best and that we owe it to those who have gone before—who couldn't have such opportunities—we owe it to them to apply ourselves without stint in magnifying our gifts.

Ultimately, you will be reckoned as intelligent, here and in the life to come, to the degree that you have inherited and practically embraced in your cell structure the light and power of God. How do I know that? President Joseph Fielding Smith (he was at the time president of the Salt Lake Temple, and I think there is a connection) said his favorite verse was, “That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light”—and that isn't just here [pointing to the head], it's the whole apperceptive mass—“he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (D&C 50:24).

Add section 84 [“For the word of the Lord is truth, and whatsoever is truth is light, and whatsoever is light is Spirit, even the Spirit of Jesus Christ,” D&C 84:45] and parallels in 88. “Intelligence cleaveth unto intelligence; . . . truth embraceth truth; . . . light cleaveth unto light” (D&C 88:40). It's just like two candles that get close enough together that they become one flame.

Lorenzo Snow was visited one day by a man named Reverend Prentice. It's on record. My grandfather kept a copy of this and sent it to every one of his children. He said that the reverend walked into what he considered was more or less a business office—the office of the First Presidency—where decisions were made and problems solved. Reverend Prentice didn't expect to see what he saw. What he saw, he said, was the holiest face, except one, he had ever seen in his life. And that was Lorenzo Snow. He tried to put into words something about the eyes, something about the grace and modesty, something about the peace of his personality, but he ended up saying, “There aren't words.” His conclusion was, if the Church of Jesus Christ can produce even a few persons like that man, they will

not need a lot of books or tracts or an extensive missionary program. The world will see. Holiness is another name for the effects of the Spirit of God on the total soul. Lorenzo Snow knew that.

I've been up on the Mount of Transfiguration several times. We don't know for sure if that is the exact mount, but there are lots of high mountains in the Galilee. It is significant that Jesus is transfigured. Apparently he was filled with light. "Glistering" is the way the gospel account puts it (see Luke 9:29). So were Peter, James, and John transfigured (see Matthew 17:5). You have parallel accounts of the Nephite multitude (see 3 Nephi 17:24; 19:13–14, 25).

At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matthew 28:18). But the Joseph Smith Translation says that Jesus uses this phrase when he comes down from the Mount of Transfiguration: "All power." Now listen, if that's true of Jesus, can anything like that be said of his disciples or even some such as us, a mere humble fellowship of ordinary people? Listen to these exact words. "He that is ordained of God and sent forth, the same is appointed to be the greatest, notwithstanding he is the least and the servant of all" (D&C 50:26).

I sometimes went as a stake president into bishops' offices and said, "Your chart's upside down: bishop, counselors, all these others at the top, and then, way down here, those other nameless, faceless people. Turn it up the other way. Bishop, you are the servant of all." That's the difference between the quest for power in Nietzsche's sense, power that tromps on the heads and doesn't care if the blood squirts. Power, or *Macht* in German—that's the kind of power that corrupts and the absolute of which corrupts absolutely. Christ's power is always persuasive and never coercive. He promises that power to his disciples, not the other kind.

"He that is ordained of God and sent forth, the same is appointed to be the greatest, notwithstanding he is the least and the servant of all. Wherefore, he is possessor of all things." Now listen: "The life and the light, the Spirit and the power, sent forth by the will of the Father through Jesus Christ, his Son" (D&C 50:26–27). But in the next verse, and here's the "but"—"but no man is possessor of all things except he be purified and cleansed from all sin" (D&C 50:28).

Now, to sum it up one other way—I've been in running correspondence with a fine minister who is doing a book against us. It's against Lorenzo Snow's couplet, which he considers the absolute heresy of the Church of Jesus Christ. He hasn't written it in bitterness. He's lived among us for twenty-seven years. For Christmas a year ago I sent him a seventeen-page document. What I did was to take every sentence in the New Testament in which Jesus characterizes himself and then find a matching sentence in which he characterizes his followers. "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12); "ye are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). "I am the salt of the earth" (paraphrase of Luke 14:36 JST); "Ye are the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13). "I am the true vine" (John 15:1); "ye are the branches" (John 15:5). "I have living water to give" (paraphrase of John 4:10–11); "he that believeth on me . . . out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38). "I am the living bread which came down from heaven" (John 6:51); ye are to "feed my sheep" (John 21:16–17). On and on.

Conclusion: Everything you can say about Christ as to his attributes and powers, you can ultimately say about yourself in potentia. That's what he came to make real, not just possible. It was always possible. He came to make it actual. So, he says, to sum it up in Doctrine and Covenants 93, "I give unto you these sayings that you may understand and know how to worship, and know what you worship, that you may come unto the Father in my name, and in due time receive of his fulness. For if you keep my commandments you shall receive of his fulness, and be glorified in me as I am in the Father" (D&C 93:19–20).

Is there any conceivable insight that is more life-transforming than that? It was Lorenzo Snow's guiding star from his early days. For all of my limitations and weakness, it has also been my guiding star.

Note

1 Herbert J. Walberg, "Synthesis of Research on Teaching," in *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, ed. Merlin C. Whittrock (New York: Macmillan, 1986).