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Start with Faith: A Conversation with Elder Steven E. Snow

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Elder Steven E. Snow

Bennett: *You must have been one of the early classes at the law school?*

Snow: The second class. We are often reminded by the charter class that we are second class! It was a very enjoyable time. We spent one year down at the former Catholic elementary school, St. Francis, and then moved into the law building.

Pike: *Why did you go to St. George? And what type of law did you practice there?*

Snow: When I arrived, I was probably the tenth attorney in town. When I was called as a Seventy, there were well over a hundred attorneys practicing in St. George. I started as a prosecutor for the county for a couple of years and associated with a private firm at the same time. It was allowed then because there wasn't a high enough salary to support prosecutors. I left after two years, and David Nuffer and I formed our own firm, and that grew over the years. We opened offices in Nevada and Salt Lake City. David is a great friend and is now a federal district judge here in Salt Lake City, and I get to see him on occasion. We had a great professional experience. I was more of a generalist while my partners tended to specialize. I liked to do different things, so I did some litigation, some municipal law, and business and real estate, primarily.

I grew up in St. George, and so did my wife, Phyllis. Her mother is a Hafen. So we both have connections that go way back in southern Utah. Phyllis and I are the same age. We grew up together, dated, and kind of raised each other. So there is quite a tie to that place, which has a lot to do with my love of history. We were told stories of our ancestors and how hard the area was to settle—the things our family had done. The Snows arrived in 1861, and the Hafens arrived not long after that.

Bennett: *So your love of Church history began when you were growing up in St. George. Did anything else contribute to your interest in Church history?*

Well, I always liked history in school. My great-uncle was Milton R. Hunter, and he wrote the textbook on Utah history we all used in high school. So there was that influence.

I grew up two blocks from the temple. I could see it from my bedroom window every night before I went to bed. Everybody back then in St. George was just family, and everyone had stories, and I loved those. Growing up in St. George, you gain a sense of place, so learning about the history was always interesting for me. Probably what really turned the light on was when I began reading some of the books by Juanita Brooks. She wrote several books about Church history including, of course, *The Mountain Meadow Massacre*.

The one that I found most delightful was *Uncle Will Tells His Story*. She had interviewed her husband, Will, and recorded his answers on tape and wrote this delightful book. And I thought, *Will Brooks was just an ordinary guy. He was a postmaster and, at one time, sheriff of Washington County and a good man.* She wrote this remarkable book, and it convinced me that everybody has a story and that we really ought to learn these stories.

Bennett: *Did you know Juanita Brooks personally?*

Snow: I knew Juanita Brooks. Karl, her son, is a very close friend. I have read, of course, all of her books and Levi Peterson's book about her. All of this was probably a release from practicing law—I actually found it a little more interesting at times than practicing law, but that's what earned a living for me. I really enjoyed the practice of law, but I have always loved history, so I try to keep up on it. I did a lot of reading.

Pike: *So did the First Presidency give you any specific commissions in this new calling as Church Historian? Are there any specific marching orders that you feel comfortable sharing?*

Snow: President Monson, President Eyring, and President Uchtdorf were all part of my calling. I think they had been pleased with the direction Elder Jensen had set, and they wanted someone to continue that course, as a keeper of the records and someone to watch over the work. You know the background and history of the calling; there were sixteen years where there wasn't a historian, between 1989 and 2005. I think Elder Jensen changed that, and with his remarkable leadership he set the ship on course, and it's gone well. One of the first books I read after being called was *The Adventures of a Church Historian* by Leonard Arrington. I talked to a lot of people, and there is a lot of history with this calling, and it can be a little sensitive, obviously. I felt a sense that the Brethren were exercising a lot of trust in me, as they would with anyone they called to this position.

Bennett: *Some scholars have wondered why they don't call an academic as Church historian. Is there any sense that there is a distrust of academic historians and scholars, or is that not on the radar?*

Snow: I don't know if it's distrust; I think it's more of tradition. If you go back to Willard Richards, George A. Smith, and Anthon Lund, they were all either members of the Twelve or members of the First Presidency who were historians. They had an office of assistants and clerks, Andrew Jenson being one of the most well-known Assistant Church Historians. Elder Joseph Fielding Smith obviously had a great influence over the office, with

the many decades he was involved as Church Historian. It was much more restricted than we find it today. All the collections were in the old Church Administration Building, so it was different. I think when Elder Howard W. Hunter became Church Historian in 1970, he wasn't really comfortable with the call. That is when it was decided to bring in Dr. Leonard Arrington from Utah State University as Church Historian. He had a remarkable decade. But there was a downside as well. I think that led to a time where there was a lot of scrutiny and questioning about what we should do in the future. Following Dr. Arrington, there were a couple of historians called, but there was a gap of about sixteen years when there was technically not a Church Historian. Elder Marlin K. Jensen had a vision of where it could and should go and gave great leadership in a very difficult time. He was here at a good time, because this facility [the Church History Library] was started and completed. It is a remarkable facility for Church history.

It's been a good seven to eight years of Church history, and I think Elder Jensen is primarily responsible for that. And don't underestimate, obviously, President Hinckley's love of Church history. His fingerprints are all over everything. He and Elder Jensen were very close. Elder Jensen was an excellent historian. It's the kind of calling where you have to have a steady hand, and you have to make sure you let the Brethren know what's going on. I've always found if you are very up front, very forthright, and very open about what you are doing and what you plan to do and try to follow direction, generally you are fine. When that doesn't happen, I think that's when problems occur.

Part of my challenge is to make certain that I understand that if the Brethren have questions, we get to them and answer them quickly. We have an opportunity to defend positions with them and to state our case, but ultimately if we are given specific direction by the Brethren, we take it. My view is that being open about our history solves a whole lot more problems than it creates. We might not have all the answers, but if we are open (and we now have pretty remarkable transparency), then I think in the long run that will serve us well. I think in the past there was a tendency to keep a lot of the records closed or at least not give access to information. But the world has changed in the last generation—with the access to information on the Internet, we can't continue that pattern; I think we need to continue to be more open.

***Bennett:** How do you think this openness will impact educators of Church history? With a generation of young people that we are dealing with now that is*

so well informed electronically about things in the past, but not sensing that in their curriculum?

Snow: That is where we need to improve. Fortunately Seminaries and Institutes and Curriculum have really stepped up and said in essence, “You know we really want to take this on, we would like to talk about these sensitive issues in our seminaries and institutes.” It’s one thing to tell a fourteen-year-old some of these sensitive things and they say, “OK, that’s great.” But sometimes when you are twenty-something, it comes across a little differently. I think we can build faith and better prepare people if we will weave some of the unusual threads in history into the curriculum.

***Bennett:** How will the Church History Department actually do that?*

Snow: We have an obligation to provide our members reliable information on some of these more difficult questions from our history. We are committed to do that.

***Bennett:** And the Book of Abraham?*

Snow: Yes, that too.

***Bennett:** Will the effort to “be more open” have any impact on access to records?*

Snow: Probably, but I think that has already occurred. The Joseph Smith Papers Project for the last several years has been a treasure trove of access. That is a priority of the department, to get more and more out online. There will always be some things which will be private, sacred, and confidential. But I am just amazed at what’s out there. There is so much online now from the Church History Department.

I think today’s technology makes it easier to get things out. I have been very pleased with the position of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve about making information available.

***Bennett:** Is there another big project down the line, after the Joseph Smith Papers Project wraps up in a few years?*

Snow: B. H. Roberts wrote the last comprehensive history of the Church. I think it’s time we did a multivolume history of the Church which will be comprehensive but written at a level that could be read by the general membership of the Church.

Particularly outside of North America, there is such a story to be told about how the Church has developed in the last two or three generations, and it’s a rather remarkable story. None of that, of course, is included in Roberts’s work. That is pretty exciting to me.

The Joseph Smith Papers Project continues to be a major emphasis. We think that will run until 2022. So there is still quite a bit of work to do there; we are in the Nauvoo period, which was a really prolific time of record keeping. So that is very exciting.

Other things we are doing include some renovations to the Church History Museum. A totally new exhibit will go up on the first floor. It's the first time in almost thirty years that any kind of renovation has been done to the main "covenant restored" exhibit. We have had a really top-notch museum display firm consulting with us. We will probably have the museum closed for about a year to complete that exhibit, beginning in fall 2014.

Bennett: *There's certainly plenty to keep you busy.*

Snow: We have an important role with historic sites in the Church. We have input and are consulted about the preservation and maintenance of historic sites.

Bennett: *From an educator's perspective, the need to blend Church history into religious education sometimes has been frustrating in that the message at Church history sites has been so missionary-centered. A lot of people either walk away very happy about what they've heard or rather unsatisfied. Take the site at Nauvoo, for example. Will there be some sort of effort to tell the Church history story that hasn't been told but that I think we need to tell? Where do we go with the message at the Church history sites, not just the brick and mortar?*

Snow: You have read some of the work by Susan Easton Black and Benjamin Pykles. The history is interesting. When [the Heber C. Kimball house site] was first envisioned, obviously they were trying to do a Williamsburg. Of course, the public money did not materialize, and there wasn't really any funding, public or private, so the Church stepped in and funded it. The pattern over the years has been to staff the historical sites with missionaries and to make it a missionary opportunity.

My view is that the greater role of these historical sites is not the number of converts from them, although I suspect there are some, but to build the faith of members of the Church. When a family travels to one of these sites and walks the grounds and hears the stories, it becomes easier to understand the faith, devotion, and courage of these people and some of the trials they went through. I think that is where we gain our greatest benefit from these sites. It's letting people feel the spirit of the place and hear the stories and background.

So I think historical sites must be viewed in a much broader way than just a potential opportunity for a convert baptism. I think what really needs to be looked at is what it does for people who are *already* members. The experience enriches testimony, enhances education, and promotes deeper understanding of issues. I think the experience is much richer when you are actually there than when you just read about it.

We have done some things online for our historic sites. In June 2012, up at Calgary, we talked about a southern Alberta application on the iPad where you could visit the site virtually and learn about the places in southern Alberta. Through the iPad application you go to the coordinates, learn what actually happened there, visit the homes, and do things of that kind. I think there is a remarkable future for that kind of application in a place like Winter Quarters. We have the trail center and the Kanesville Tabernacle, but there are a lot of things that happened in that larger area. Those kinds of virtual experience applications are helpful, but there is nothing like being on the ground and hearing the stories, in my view.

We have a Historic Sites Executive Committee consisting of members from the Missionary Department, Temple Department, Special Projects Department, Presiding Bishopric and Church History Department—everybody that is a player in historical sites. These issues are discussed and decided upon and this has been very helpful. We have developed a strategic plan for historic sites, setting priorities about where we really need to put our resources and do preservation.

***Bennett:** In terms of education and Church history and doctrine, BYU, of course, has its Jerusalem Center, which has been a great blessing to our young people and is really getting into the history of the Holy Land. What might the future hold in terms of educating our college students in Church history in the way that is going to meet their needs? Anything similar to what we do in the Jerusalem Center?*

Snow: Well, I don't know your own personal experience, but when I went back as an adult to Concord, Boston, and Liberty Square [in Boston], that gave me a whole different perspective on American history. I think that experience is something that young people can have if they go to the place and hear the stories. I believe that has been one of the powerful outcomes of places like Mormon historic handcart sites at Martin's Cove and elsewhere.

To be on the ground and to hear the stories and even in the case of Martin's Cove, experience a little bit of what the pioneers went through during the

trek experience is really good for young people. Pioneer treks have been a grassroots thing that really gained momentum in 1997 when we celebrated our sesquicentennial. I think treks have helped a lot of young people gain testimonies as they have gone through that experience. I think whatever ideas we can develop and expand in that regard will be helpful for our young people.

Bennett: *I want to ask about the involvement with professional historical associations between the Church Historical Department and the Mormon History Association, the John Whitmer Historical Association, and many others. Where do you see this going in terms of interplay? In the past some have had great suspicions about these associations and wouldn't let their staff be involved.*

I think the Mormon History Association (MHA) has been a good model which I hope we can continue to develop with other associations. I think the MHA has been a good experience for us. We bring something to the table obviously. We can contribute to the discussion.

From the perspective of the Church History Department, I think BYU professors have benefited from their involvement with MHA and other historical organizations.

We have found that it's in everyone's best interest to build bridges and friendships. Mountain Meadows is a good example. There we have reached out to descendants of victims.

We're looking for ways to do more. I think MHA has been a very nice model. How can you really talk about Mormon history and not have the Church History Department at least in the audience or at the table? It seems to make sense that we should be there. We think our involvement with the MHA has actually gone very well. So we are hopeful for more opportunities. It's a long way from twenty years ago.

Pike: *Some people feel it is not really possible to write an accurate history of the Church without being a Latter-day Saint to begin with. Do you agree with that sentiment?*

Snow: I don't agree with that. I think it depends what you call Mormon history and Church history. If you are making a distinction between those two, then maybe you could say that. I think the facts are the facts. We may not understand all the reasons and we may want to make some explanation. We are not always in possession of all the facts. I think we need to be as accurate as we can, as faith promoting as we can, but we need to continue to seek new truths and insights. . Every week is like discovery time. There are new

treasures that come to light, and it deepens our understanding. We can find things that may shift our thinking a little bit.

Every generation rewrites history a little bit with their own methods and perspectives; that's okay. We try to tell the story as accurately as possible and then we hope there will be those of faith who will step forward and add other insights. Many with whom you associate at BYU write faith-promoting works based on the history we find. I think we need to be very careful that we are accurate, because if we aren't, it can come back to really haunt us. It's good to tell the truth.

Bennett: *What about the story of women in the Church? Is it adequately told?*

Snow: It has not been. There will be more coming out on women in the Church. The early Relief Society minutes are an interesting insight into the role of women in the early Church. Some on our staff are working exclusively to tell the story of women in the Church.

I think this is of interest to a lot of people, and we are going to see more and more written on the topic.

Pike: *What is the role of the Church Historian's Office and Church history in relation to missionary work? Do you interface with the global missionary effort? If so, in what ways, and how can Church history complement and supplement missionary efforts?*

Snow: We do travel and record our experiences internationally. To be in Estonia and in St. Petersburg and interview members of the Church who are actually the pioneers is remarkable. They were baptized in 1991! We see a very expansive role of our mission to capture the international history of the Church, which includes missionary work. It's amazing to me how members resonate with their own history within their own country. They love the stories of the westward trek in the USA, and they love the nineteenth-century Church history, but they also love hearing about those early members and missionaries who gained a foothold in their own country. They bring out scrapbooks and photos. The year 1991 does not seem that long ago to me, but to these people in the former Soviet Union it's been an amazing generation.

Pike: *How do you go about capturing all of this? Is there some sort of worldwide Church history organization?*

Snow: Yes. We have a small global team here in the department. It's very lean, but we have called area Church history advisers throughout the world. We also have regional advisers. Countries where we have a large area,

like Brazil or Mexico, will have different regions with Church history advisers within those regions. Some of those countries send in 100 percent of their annual history reports. Right now our focus is on the annual history and oral interviews. We worry we are losing the opportunity to record the history from these older members who are now dying. So places like the Philippines, where the Church gained a hold in the early 1960s, are our primary focus for these interviews. Most developing areas of the Church are focusing on annual histories and oral histories or interviews. You get into places like Germany and the United Kingdom, where our history is more mature, we have record preservation centers being established. We are preserving, cataloging, and storing records with the thought in mind to share them with members over the years.

That is one of our great initiatives which will bless the worldwide Church. The sharing of their own history from their own place. Africa is where I spent four years when I was first called as a General Authority. Much of their history has been developed since 1980. I mean, it's really a thirty-year Church in Africa. We have, of course, been there since 1853 when the first missionaries showed up in Capetown, but it was primarily a European church in South Africa until the revelation in 1978. There is a tremendous history in Africa. We have some good people who are doing their best to capture that.

***Pike:** Thank you so much for meeting and sharing your thoughts with us. We really appreciate this opportunity. In closing, we would love hearing your answer to this question. If you were speaking to a group of Latter-day Saint students—whether in a seminary, in an institute, or on a BYU campus—and had the opportunity to share a few things that you think are the most compelling about the why of Church history, what would you say?*

Snow: Church history to me has always been a very important part of my testimony. Again, this is because I feel a sense of place and admire the accomplishments of those who have gone before. For example, what would bring early Saints to Utah where they had to eke out a living—just show up and start building a life? What causes people to do something like that? Suddenly you start to understand a little bit more about faith, devotion, sacrifice, courage, and the meaning of the gospel in people's lives. But you know, today, we all pull or push our own figurative handcars. We all have challenges in life. And I am not sure some of those early folks wouldn't be just happy to have their own life. They might rather go to St. George in the 1860s than to deal with issues today.

But to me, learning about their lives and their history has been very faith promoting. If you think of Church history as a quilt or a tapestry, it is the most rich, beautiful thing I have ever observed. If you examine it carefully, you are going to find some peculiar threads in that beautiful quilt or tapestry, and if you pull at them and obsess on those threads, you will miss the wonderful message of our history. If you will step back and look at the whole quilt or tapestry, it's beautiful. Part of the challenge in today's world with the Internet is that people are pulling out the peculiar threads and obsessing over them without a context, instead of seeing the whole picture. So don't study *too little* of Church history, as Richard Turley always says. If you're going to study it, start with faith, like Elder Holland said in that beautiful talk he gave in [the April 2013] conference.¹ Start with the faith that you have and don't get off in the weeds with all of these peculiar little pieces of our history. Viewed in context of time and place, most things make a lot more sense. But if you pull at these threads and just obsess about them, you miss the bigger picture.

You have to approach it with faith, and you've got to balance faith with reason. We hope people study Church history. We hope they study Church history a lot. But I would add, don't forget what brought you to it in the first place. Don't give up. Don't jump out of the boat. Stay in the boat and rely on the faith and testimony that you do have. Because in my view, the more you study, the more your faith will grow and develop. There will be a few questions we are just going to have to put on the shelf and get to later. Some we will answer in this mortal existence, others we may have to wait. But the big questions, the important questions will get answered if we exercise our faith. That's what I would tell them.

Notes

1. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Lord, I Believe," *Ensign*, May 2013, 93–95.