

Pillars of My Faith

A WEB OF ILLUMINATING MOMENTS

By Clayne W. Robison

I AM CONVINCED THAT HENRY ADAMS WAS ON TARGET IN his autobiography when he said: "Real learning is not so much the product of reasonable thinking as of those illuminating moments which permanently warp the mind." I would like to merely walk you through a few of my mind warping moments in the hope that they might awaken helpful recollections or connections for your own struggle to draw the strands of your faith together.

THE MOMENT OF CONVICTION

THE most permanent warping of my mind concerning my faith in the message of the restored gospel came from a 24-hour sequence of events which began on a brilliant autumn afternoon in the upper assembly room of the old Charlottenburg Branch House in Berlin. In the course of my testimony at a missionary conference, I referred to my interest in the "boldly testifying" door approach in the Southern States Mission lessons which my mother, sensing my discouraged letters, had procured from the missionaries living in our home in Atlanta and had sent to me. When I said, "of course, this approach wouldn't work with the Germans. . ." I was gently interrupted in mid-sentence by Elder Marion G. Romney, our visiting apostle, who asked me very kindly, "Elder, how do you know that this approach would not work with the Germans; have you tried it?"

"No sir," I replied. "Our mission plan prescribes something else." He then nodded that I should continue.

Later in the day I entered the small office where Brother Romney was interviewing each of us in turn. The low slant of amber light reflecting from the brilliant maples outside the window placed him in shadow, but the warmth from his face remains with me. "Oh yes, Brother Robison. You were the elder who felt the Germans might be offended by a witness of the

Restoration during a door approach. How do you approach them here?"

I began to explain: "First lesson, we tell the story of Lehi and the trip to the promised land and place a Book of Mormon; second lesson, we 'prove' the book from the biblical references of Israel's blessing to Joseph and Ezekiel's sticks; third lesson, we further 'prove' the book from the testimonies of the witnesses. . . ."

He interrupted before I could tell him of our mission tradition to add a fourth lesson attempting to "prove" the book through pictures of South American ruins and asked, "Elder Robison, you have been on your mission about fifteen months now, haven't you?"

I nodded.

He continued, "How many times have you born your testimony of the Restoration?"

I struggled for complete honesty. "Elder Romney, that is in the eighth lesson. . . . My companion and I have only gotten to the eighth lesson once . . . and my companion gave that lesson. . . . I guess I have never said that to anyone."

With what seemed to be great sympathy he said, "Elder Robison, I want you to promise me that you will never have a missionary discussion with anyone again without taking opportunity to bear your testimony that the gospel of Jesus Christ has been restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith." I mumbled a promise and probably some other things which I have long ago forgotten and made way for the next elder.

My mind was aflame with a mixture of fear and excitement. It had been convenient for me to avoid testifying. I had now gratefully come face to face with a need to know in order to keep my promise to an apostle. He didn't even ask me if I knew. It was apparently enough that he knew and therefore knew that I could know. I pulled out the dictionary that night and began translating that Southern States door approach—including the testimonies.

The next morning, Sunday, the member conference session brought the most illuminating moments of this important sequence. Brother Romney's talk centered on two scriptural passages: John 3:3-8 which tells of Christ's conversation with

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Nicodemus about spiritual rebirth and the famous passage on the growth of faith in Alma 32, both of which I am sure I had heard discussed before in Church contexts but without the personal discovery which was to accompany this particular telling. Brother Romney painted a vivid picture of the Savior talking quietly with Nicodemus on a cool Jerusalem evening. His recounting of the Savior's testimony that the breeze of the spirit "bloweth where it listeth" and that I could "feel the sound thereof, but could not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth" permanently warped my mind. The decision to "arouse my faculties" and "exercise a particle of faith," some continued searching, and sufficient "delicious enlargement of my soul" and "enlightenment to my understanding" gratefully followed before I had finished the translation, and my companion and I spent an exhilarating week finally saying what we had come all that way to say.

Only a few Germans were stirred by those hundreds of honest testimonies during the next fifteen months, but I had been stirred. Since that important experience, whenever my listing spirit has lost its breezes, I have eventually come to feel the loss. And when they blow back, I also thankfully know how to recognize them.

BEING IN THE RIGHT PLACE

I remember, for example, a later pair of widely separated moments in the Salt Lake Tabernacle during two general conference sessions. In the first I was recently home from my mission and had squeezed in with the conference crowd onto the main floor, forward on the south bank, where the small new group of foreign speaking stake presidents, two of them from my mission, were adjusting the headphones recently installed for translation. I received an overwhelming impression of the divinity of the calling of the men at whose feet I sat.

Nine years later (seven of them as an aging but still single returned missionary) I returned to the Tabernacle for another conference session. My spirit had grown dry with three years of law school in the East (during the early sixties) and some bitterness at having felt drawn there toward an ill-fitting professional future. I had just witnessed the famous pair of talks at BYU in which Elders Ezra Taft Benson and Hugh B. Brown had expressed strong opposite convictions as to the inspiration behind the formation of the United Nations. I had been through the important but unsettling benefits of some T-group experiences and their call to my spirit toward a more healthy honesty in interpersonal relationships. I was sure that I had thereby become an expert at reading artificiality. I had served as a counsellor to three bishops and a mission president and as a high councilor and had witnessed both the spiritual benefit and frustration of those callings. The question of priesthood for blacks and some serious confusion about the "liahona" and "iron rod" versions of my breezes lay heavily upon my spirit. I had just changed my professional course for the *fourth* time

since graduating from college—this time to music—having finally given up on the possibility of bending my law training into happiness for me. But I had not yet found the security which was soon to come in that decision toward music. To use Bruce Hafen's inspired arrangement of the probable phases of an educated Mormon's life (from one of my later illuminating moments), I had passed resoundingly into level two, the pessimistic phase of my life.²

Brother John Halliday had asked me to sing a solo with the combined BYU choirs at this conference session. I stood on the front row of the choir seats on the north bank as the Brethren entered through the small door below us and greeted one another. I could not then recognize my own spirit of judgmentalness and envy as I chose to perceive artificiality in the greetings of my friend and newly called General Authority, Loren Dunn, to the other Brethren. Of course, I watched particularly closely as Elders Benson and Brown approached each other and embraced. "What wonderful actors they have become for the new television audience," I thought. "They have just disagreed vigorously in public about a significant issue obviously very important to both of them. They simply cannot be honest in such warm responses to one another."

And then came the illuminating moment. As I looked past their embrace, I saw the now much larger cluster of foreign stake presidents putting on their headphones for the session and, as tears came to my eyes, the spirit brought me a strong recollection of my former feeling when I had sat there. What had happened? Why had my feelings of love and trust for these same brethren changed so dramatically over the nine years? Which was the accurate reading? Here I stood, nine more years into the only life I would have—educated, more experienced in Church leadership, finally married and starting the spiritual responsibility of a family—and yet the recollections of my spiritual rebirth were faint, and I knew it and didn't like it and, thanks to Elder Romney, I understood it and decided again to do something about it.

I have told my children of that pair of experiences, but that does not vicariously provide them with the same illumination. They will have to choose their own moments. Perhaps the most important thing I have done for them, however, has been to provide for them the example and habit which my parents provided for me of always being in those places where the spirit might have the easiest access to my life and where I might have the best chance of recognizing it. Those habit patterns of being in the right place were set so firmly in my youth that the number of Sundays in my life that I have missed an available sacrament or priesthood meeting would still probably not reach to all the fingers of one hand. During the war when an organized branch was beyond the reach of our rationed gas supply, my parents would hold meetings in our home near Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, and invite Dad's fellow soldiers to dinner after they had administered the sacrament for us. We would often have just returned from a local protestant Sunday school so that Mother could be satisfied that we had maintained unbroken the habit of "going to church on Sunday." Mother's spiritual

testimony was not really strong until the end of her life, but her conviction about the importance of always being where we could grow a testimony was unshakable. In the late forties, for example, we never missed the two forty-mile round trips each Sunday and the one on Tuesday over the undulating New Jersey countryside to the shabby East Orange chapel. Here the major influences were intelligent, dynamic, noted leaders who had weathered the New York challenge and were still committed to the Church, serving as scoutmasters and Sunday School teachers. I also remember the difference in spirit between those whose commitment was still strong and those whom the world had weakened. Even at twelve, I resonated to the former and had compassion for the latter.

PARADOX AND OPPOSITION AS ENTICEMENTS TO ETERNAL GROWTH

BEYOND these strong convictions about the importance of being in the right place and listening attentively to spiritual intimations, there are a couple of synthesizing concepts that have been very helpful to me in bringing the often diverse strands of my faith together. Perhaps the most universally useful has been a deepening appreciation for the crucial value of paradox and opposition in the process of eternal growth.

As Lehi tells Jacob, "it must needs be, that there is an opposition in *all* things. If not so . . . righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad" (2 Nephi 2:11, emphasis added). This one passage from the Book of Mormon in its full extension has itself provided me with enough confirmation of the inspiration behind that book to have allowed me to comfortably shelve the passing questions about its authenticity which have floated across my horizon from time to time.

Elsewhere I have discussed a rather comprehensive model for responding constructively to the value of opposition in everyday situations.³ This model grew out of a struggle several years ago to figure out how to get voice students' minds and bodies to comprehend the many strongly divergent sensory, rhythmic, anatomical, aerodynamic, and acoustical oppositions with which the process of learning to sing beautifully is fraught. I do not have space, nor would it be appropriate to discuss that model in detail here, but any discussion about the pillars of my faith would be incomplete without some reference to it. The process of opposition helps me clarify almost every moment of puzzlement in my life. Since I have come to expect it to be manifest in one way or another at every turn, I welcome it as an old friend. It used to bring apprehension, now it brings the peace of recognition.

It seems to me that it is the major safeguarding principle which the Lord placed around his children when he sent them out to try their agency in faith. If, for example, every really important question in life suggests more than one reasonable solution and those solutions tend to tug at opposite poles, we may

eventually be enticed like Elders Hugh B. Brown and Ezra Taft Benson into choosing to love beyond our disagreements, which is apparently the Lord's own supreme solution and the one he values most in us. We may be enticed into choosing—with fear and trembling—what we perceive to be the righteous path or as Charles Malik put it, to become "decisive with the utmost tentativeness and tenderness."⁴

STYLISTIC TOLERANCE

THIS view of the virtue of opposition leads in turn to the possibility of actually learning to value the companionship of those who hold opposite views. The Church is often accused of fostering the homogenization of style in the name of "becoming one," but I have come to sense that the "one" we are to become is "one" in our understanding and evaluation of principles such as this concept of opposition and not in our stylistic cloning of the conversation patterns of recently returned missionaries or Relief Society spiritual living teachers.

Elder Neal Maxwell turned my mind to that issue during the 1970s at a devotional for new missionaries at the Missionary Training Center. Standing there in front of that sea of white shirts and dark ties he had the audacity to maintain that living the gospel *well* actually encouraged heterogeneity of style. For proof he cited the similarity of dress, grooming, speech, diet, viewpoint and approach which seemed paradoxically to pervade the "do-my-own-thing" hippy culture of the period when compared with the shocking change of style they, as missionaries, would probably experience when a new mission president was called in the middle of their missions. Anyone who has served a mission during a transition of mission presidents will probably find his evidence convincing.

I experienced a personal confirmation of that truth one day after returning depressed to my branch office from an MTC mission leadership meeting in which Clarence Robison, another MTC branch president, had been asked to discuss with us the detailed questionnaire which he filled out during his punctually scheduled ten minute initial interviews with new missionaries. I sadly contemplated my practice of tailoring my initial interviews to the moment's impressions, which had required that I warn missionaries waiting at my door for appointments that they should bring their studies because my impressions had been known to dramatically disrupt any attempt at a neat schedule. David Liebhart, my executive secretary, met me as I entered my office with Brother Robison's model questionnaire in my hand. After sensitively eliciting the cause of my heavy spirit he asked, "Do you like the results that you get from your style of interviewing?" The question shouldn't have shocked me, but after a moment's thought, I replied, "Well, yes, I guess I do." Whereupon he took the model questionnaire gently from my hand and tore it into the waste basket. That experience strongly encouraged me to stop fighting and in fact to begin to treasure the often major differences in style of my own family

members, my wife, colleagues, students, neighbors, and particularly of Church leaders such as my lawyer and bishop, Edward Kimball. Though his style is very different from my own (which has left us on occasion with some interpersonal tension) still I have gained a respect unto awe for his wisdom and comprehensive insight on issues of principle.

THE VALUE OF OPPOSITE PREFERENCES

A connected insight has left me treasuring even the differences in preference which too often divide us. This was put to the acid test many summers ago when I took my priests quorum for a kayak trip down the Colorado River above Moab. Our tastes had been separating us for the whole year I had been their advisor. I braced myself for ten hours of driving trapped by the fancy sound system installed in the van we were using. I got a concession from them on the issue of volume because my profession depends upon the continued sensitivity of my hearing, but by then it had become so important for me to thaw the cold war occasioned by our strong divergences in taste that I had promised myself to flow through their music with every ounce of teachability I could muster. As we returned through the night and early morning hours to Provo, I listened closely to many repeats of their then very popular Queen tape. I was finally able to hear beyond my normal revulsion for the heavy handed and to me boring rhythms of most rock music to the delightful sophistication of that group's harmonic inventiveness and textural variety. That painful willingness to risk the opposite side of my normal musical propensities brought a rushing change in those boys' hearts toward me. We moved easily into a discussion of the anti-righteousness which those clever lyrics were proselyting and finally into a quality of friendship which has left me very comfortable with the stream of Aaronic priesthood and scouting callings which have followed.

The insight for me here is that learning to flow through each new and unfamiliar arena will probably turn out to have been in subtle ways a metaphoric practicing of those twin transcendent virtues of repentance and forgiveness—repentance for having held to our old rutted tastes and preferences so self-righteously, and forgiveness of those who have shunned us because of the distance our public preferences may have wedged between us.

THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF TALENT

NOT only am I learning to treasure the oppositions in viewpoint, style, and preference between me and my neighbors, but I have begun to recognize and harness some of the opposing forces within my own soul. The discovery of some of these has had a major enriching effect on my ability to perform my chosen life's work with both success and joy—too often mutually

exclusive qualities in professional life. The insight came as a flash during the dress rehearsal for a performance of Handel's Messiah which Gerold Ottley was conducting and JoAnn Ottley was singing with me in the Provo Tabernacle. My performing life had been plagued by a strange cycle of discomforts. After initially revelling in the strokes which my early developed teenage voice had brought me, I had avoided becoming a professional musician for so long partly because I feared that the feeling of extreme self-centeredness which seemed to accompany the necessary gearing up for a performance would overwhelm my life. After the discovery that my unhappiness in law and other connected pursuits was a worse fate still and my subsequent turning to music, I was nonetheless plagued by a sort of guilt in the applause that always followed performances. I felt like a thief in receiving a reward for something I had not really earned. I had never had to work for those musical capabilities; they had always fallen easily into my body. I found myself actually hurrying out after performances in order to avoid the embarrassed feeling which came when people expressed appreciation. (I should note that at this time in my life, I had for some time been intrigued and helped in teaching voice lessons by the practical applications of right and left brain personality theory and the Self 1 and Self 2 of Timothy Gallwey's "Inner Game" theory.) But as I sat that afternoon before the orchestra and watched Jerry struggle and rejoice his way through what I think was his first complete conducted Messiah and listened to JoAnn sing with such delight, much of what I had been reading and thinking and teaching about the virtue of oppositions—even the oppositions of spirit present in ones own being—suddenly opened my mind to a saving insight: "I"—the uncreated intelligence "me"—is probably not the "me" of my talent. There are at least two of us in this body. The uncreated intelligence "me" is the chooser and therefore the potential learner and the real "me" for whose growth God cares enough to have placed in juxtaposition in this body another "Me"—a "light of Christ Me"—filled with gifts and talents and even burdens designed to teach the "learner me"—if I will listen and respond well—what I need to know. If I will grant him place and attempt to take no credit, I can sit on my own shoulder, so to speak, and rejoice right along with the audience in God's shared use of my body to accomplish his purposes in the learning me and in the learning, uncreated intelligence "mes" of my fellow men and women in the audience.

AGENCY AND THE PERSONAL NATURE OF INSPIRATION

THESE illuminating warpings of my mind are the *current* pillars of my faith. They may or may not become pillars of anyone else's faith. Too often I have tried to force them upon others as *their* truth, only to discover that the insights have come to me primarily for my benefit and thus for the benefit of those over whom I have legitimate stewardship—currently my family, my teachers quorum, and my students. Similarly, people often

hand me their lovingly composed scores for "inspired" musicals or operas, convinced that their inspiration is meant for the world and are frustrated that I cannot accept their works into my stewardship with exactly the same confidence. I have become convinced that illumination is always subject to the principles of agency as modified by the principle of stewardship and should be used both outside and inside of stewardship only upon the qualities of persuasion in "gentleness and meekness and love unfeigned, without hypocrisy and without guile" (see D&C 121). ☒

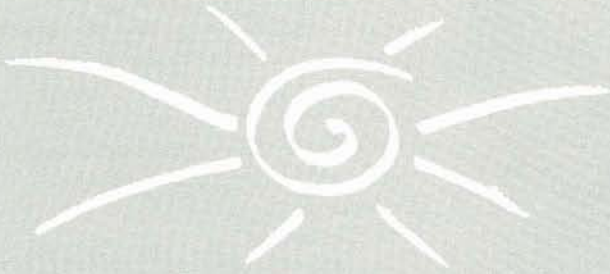
NOTES

1. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, (Boston and New York: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1918).

2. Bruce Halen, "Love Is Not Blind," delivered at a BYU Devotional Assembly, 9 January 1979, and later revised and reprinted as "On Dealing with Uncertainty" *Ensign* 9 (August 1979): 63-67.

3. "The Unfragmented Gospel." *One Hundred and Fifty Years, Sesquicentennial Lectures on Mormon Arts, Letters, and Sciences*. (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1980). pp. 101-111.

4. Charles Malik, "Leadership," from a forum address at BYU. Reprinted in *BYU Studies* Vol. 16, No. 4, pp. 541-51.



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WATCHING 12N

This early on Saturday
no one else takes the elevator.
No one presses against
his faded raincoat, sees feet
too small to carry so much weight.
He's soon enough at the windowsill,
spreading liver pate on the rye
fresh from Zabbar's. He waited
for the deli's 7:00 opening.
He can wait longer. Tucked beneath a sheet
and two blankets, Beth sleeps
at the windowbed. Not one inch
of her sensible yellow nightgown
comes into view. Only her hair
defies restraint, black curls damp
against the pillow case. Elise spreads
across the couch, nothing tucked in.
(Except her face, that is, in the pillow
which no one must touch because her face
goes there.) Her garment, that thin
second skin, resists the drawings in
of air, relaxes in each letting go.

Willene's up, the foam rubber floormat
folded away. Disbelieving the other two
who say no one looks through the windowed wall,
she buttons her blouse in the bathroom,
an unzipped skirt the only concession
she'll make to the morning rain's having turned
to steam. The lines on the yellow pad
won't do. She scratches them out, tries again.

Across the way, the man
in the raincoat knows about poems.
He taught a class or two
when still in his forties.
He'd like to tell her to give it up,
that nothing remains,
save maybe the hope that well-made pate
will outlast waiting. He'd like to say
that a clothed poet's a contradiction
in terms. He shifts his weight, heavy
with what she does not yet know: that nothing comes
till others look their fill, that nothing will come
till she strips off all her clothes.

—LORETTA RANDALL SHARP