
FROM THE EDITOR

HOMEMADE GATHERINGS OF ZION

By Elbert Eugene Peck

Occasionally as a young child my brother and sisters and I would secretly huddle in the hallway by the living room to overhear the colorful stories and loud laughter of the adults when my parents hosted their study group. For almost twenty years my parents and this group would get together to study the gospel—they'd read through Joseph Fielding Smith's *Doctrines of Salvation* and other important tomes of the fifties and sixties. But really the group strengthened each spiritually through sociality, especially through eating, telling tales, and sharing feelings after the lesson. Over the years they became very close and still met once a month even when most couples had moved from the central city Salt Lake Third Ward to the more affluent suburbs. Every summer all of the families would go on a campout, an event that was always memorable in creating new stories to retell throughout the winter—funny ones like the woman who always forgot to bring a frying pan, and spiritual ones, like the child hurt in a Bear Lake boating accident and blessed by the priesthood.

My parents have now lived in Virginia for twenty-three years and only on occasional Utah pilgrimages do they meet with the group's alumni, yet these people are still very central to their spirituality. Through countless experiences and conversations they taught my dad (who converted to the Church primarily through the group) and my mom how to be Mormons. Mom learned how to cook, sew, dip Christmas chocolates, and diligently serve in Church callings. Dad adopted the pioneer heritage and learned priesthood government and service; both learned how to interpret life's events through our Mormon perspective. Each of them gets teary-eyed when they talk about individuals in the group. When I think about the good people and the invaluable things found in the Church, I almost always think of these people. And though I live in Salt Lake City, I never see them except when I accompany my parents to a rare reunion; still, I know that at three in the morning I could call any one of them for help and they would come.

At BYU a friend invited me to join a study

group. We met every other week and explored some Church topic. Sometimes we'd invite a professor to speak to us, other times we'd discuss an article from *SUNSTONE* or *Dialogue* (we had fifteen years of *Dialogue* to catch up on), occasionally one of us would read our own research paper or make a presentation. For me, in the long run, the extra-curricular group activities and the honest, vulnerable, open-hearted conversations prompted by the discussion topics were more important than the lesson material. This group no longer meets but I still have deep feelings for each member which I feel are mutual.

After school I returned home to Virginia and started forming my own study groups. Initially I was shy to ask others to join my group (we all fear rejection) but I soon discovered that most people crave intellectual discourse and community and want to belong. The first group I organized had generic topics and speakers. Then there was a one-year group which studied the temple, followed by a one-year group which studied the Old Testament (one of the most enriching educational experiences of my life), and there was one to intelligently discuss movies (this was when VCRs became popular). I organized one group to study my obsession: Zion. In retrospect, I overdosed on groups. They overlapped and I became exhausted with too much sociality and could not keep up with their combined homework readings and administrative chores. Still, I made strong friendships which remain and continue to bless my life. When I return for a visit, although I enjoyed many friendships from Church callings, most of the friends I see are members of these groups. There are friends of the road and friends for life. The first come and go as circumstances change, the second always remain.

The first Washington, D.C., Sunstone Symposium was organized by people from these groups. In fact that symposium, like others, is in itself a large group of friends. Even though most only see each other for one weekend a year, for many regular attenders of all six D.C. symposiums the

event is a reunion of good friends where matters of the heart are discussed, shared, and heard.

Recently I attended a group I currently belong to where a woman said, "I need to talk about my struggle to believe." She then shared with us her scary religious doubts and we had a tender moment when hearts touched and our love for her and others in the group grew. She said she appreciated having us to talk with because this was such a troubling topic that, in private, even she and her husband (who was sitting beside her) avoided confronting it. Only twice have I experienced similar events at Church.

When I dream about the possibilities of the Church, I hope for a religious community—the ward—where we "live together in love" celebrating the diversity in the members of Christ's body but whose differences don't grind on each other because we are fitly joined together through love, rejoicing in each other's successes, sorrowing in each other's heartaches, and bearing each other's burdens that they may be light. Only on rare occasions does this happen in LDS wards. Although I have felt tremendous love as a Church leader, it wasn't manifest among everyone. In fact, the social experience in wards often compels conformity rather than celebrating God's diverse creations among us: cultivating orthodox appearances instead of blossoming genuineness. And this brings censure and stifles the opening of our vulnerable hearts, something which I think Joseph Smith valued and preached.

I think a lot about how to recreate our wards to make them a more supportive community where we can completely live out our religious lives—intellectually, socially, and spiritually—but I fear they are increasingly becoming more of the opposite: an institution where we obtain the saving ordinances and are taught the gospel principles which we must practice privately.

On the other hand, in small groups I have found banquets of spirituality and community which have nourished me. And while I encourage everyone to organize such groups, I am also uncomfortable with the non-democratic nature of them. The individuals most in need of such Christian bonding, those who bishops and Relief Society and elders quorum presidents work and pray to help, are often the very ones not included. The constant prophetic chiding that the shepherds of Israel should feed the flock and not themselves should compel us to seek for better ways to bind us socially and spiritually at Church as well as independent of it. ☞