

FROM THE EDITOR

VOICES FROM THE DUST



By Elbert Eugene Peck

THE first morning rays woke me on my balcony hammock. Hungry, I pulled on jeans and staggered to 7-11 to buy some milk. As I crossed the street in front of my apartment, a woman was carrying potted mums. "For Eliza?" I mumbled. She nodded, a little disturbed that her dawn's early light secret act was revealed.

That Memorial Day I spent sunning on my balcony, reducing my backlog of *New Yorkers*, and pondering prophets. All morning, I monitored the rememberers visiting the Brigham Young Cemetery across the street where America's Moses rests beside some of his wives and children.

People visit at all times and seasons. In the summer, when I sleep outside, I'm often awakened by the idling growl of a tour bus whose two dozen paparazzi disembark, stand in the middle of the street, record a five minute, still-life video-clip of the Salt Lake Temple, then proceed through the small, flowery Mormon Pioneer Memorial park into the center-of-the-block cemetery. Brigham's grave is the only one surrounded by a cast-iron fence, and they head straight to it. After reading the plaque, which reviews Brigham's and the pioneers' faith-motivated exodus, they stand there, silent, staring at the grave. Then they make their way back, noting other headstones: Mary Ann Angel Young, Lucy D. Young, Mary V. Young, Joseph A. Young, Emmeline F. Young, and Eliza R. Snow Smith (no "Young" on her headstone, although she was married to Brigham, too), Mormonism's famous poet, hymnist, and prophetess.

What are their thoughts while they stare at the headstones? I ponder as I watch them. For many tourists, the visit is a been-there-done-that item on their Mormon sites itinerary, and they note the colonizer/prophet/polygamist with little reflection. What does the elderly couple think who use the graves as their daily after-supper walk's rest-and-turn-around point? Or the curious jogger who goes in and pays panting, breathless respect? Or the local Saint who brings friends and provides com-

mentary. There's the vacationing Mormon family, mother holding a map, kids pointing as father drives the van past it. What do those parents tell their kids as they stare? Once a men's group went at night and sang "Oh, My Father" on Eliza's birthday. Each July 24th my stake sponsors a youth sunrise service, and I'm awakened by the Aaronic priesthood clankily setting up chairs and tables while the women arrange tablecloths, flowers, and refreshments; followed by megaphone pioneer tributes, priesthood leader exhortations, singing of "Blessed Honored Pioneer," and finally the noisy striking of the set. It's a nice way to start the holiday, although the stereotypical gender roles would be more appropriate if everyone wore pioneer costumes.

Ultimately, each visit with Brigham is an encounter with what the caller brings with her. The voices from the dust are but the voices from our own soul: devotion, curiosity, gratitude, sexism, indifference, history, boredom, fortitude, inspiration. A headstone is a granite Rorschach inkblot.

My afternoon balcony contemplations leaped a century and turned ninety-degrees when the Associated Press called about the death of Ezra Taft Benson. As I took the news in, I turned from gazing south to the cemetery to west toward The Gateway apartments, the high-security residence of the Church president. Just beyond and towering above, the U.S. flag atop the Joseph Smith Memorial Building was still at half-mast for Richard Nixon, adding an appropriate somber tone.

Throughout the day, I frequently looked at the prophet's apartment and thought about President Benson. (Our next issue will feature his *in memoriam* piece.) I reflected on his talks that engaged me—concurring and disagreeing—his powerful first presidential address; the ones on pride, women, and single adults; one on using the Book of Mormon to strengthen converts colored my mission a decade before he became prophet; and "The Proper Role of Government," with which I contended from high school through my undergraduate years. I thought of his fiery per-

sonality, dogged commitment, conservative views, integrity and old-age kindness. He was not a person with whom I would have chosen to have an on-going, if one-sided, conversation (as I have with Thomas Jefferson and Joseph Smith), but his prominence and forcefulness in the Church required it, like Nixon's did in government. Nevertheless, the deliberations are fruitful, requiring me to grudgingly change views, to respect and love, and to struggle to understand his puzzling blend of faith, worldview, and motivations. When engaging Brigham there are, of course, as many contraries as with President Benson, but the distance of time makes it easier to select only favorite topics; with contemporaries it's harder to avoid (forget) the vices. Still, like the visitors to Brigham's grave, and like most conversations, I primarily hear from President Benson the issues I want to hear. It takes effort to be open to the whole person.

A week later, we heard the voice of a living prophet. The simple fact of a prophet's speaking requires Saints to listen, consider, and respond. In one day, the Church entered into an incredible dialogue with him; there were energy, hope, commitment, excitement, and a here-and-now perspective looking to the future. Past prophets give needed perspective to today's challenges, but living prophets make the present portentous. We need the individual charisma of a prophet: it is hard to sustain a conversation, even one-sided, with a council. Ideas are connected to persons.

Joseph named Doctrine and Covenants 88 The Olive Leaf because it was "plucked from the Tree of Paradise, the Lord's message of peace to us." We feel the same about President Hunter's inaugural words and share them in our first last-page "An Olive Leaf"—a section that will host messages of peace by past and present prophets and prophetesses.

I view my life as a lived conversation with God, in assent and dissent, but always pondering his words, living my response, and listening for his—ever changing my mind and my heart as one does in any on-going, chatty friendship. To a less-animated degree, I engage in one-sided tête-à-têtes of heart and mind with selected other living and dead individuals, pondering how they lived in their time, discovering commonalities, applying their views to my world, concluding when they're wrong or right—freeing myself from the limits of my time. It is possible, as Robert Frost penned in "The Tuft of Flowers," to hold "brotherly speech with one whose thought I had not hoped to reach," for with effort and thought, we do indeed discover that humans "work together," I told him from the heart, "Whether they work together or apart." ☞