

TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

Dean L. May

SEEKING SPIRITUAL WITNESS



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Although spiritual manifestations are often emotional, tears and sentiment are not a requirement. So how can we discern between the Spirit and our personal emotions?

ALL OF US who seek to better our lives need to consider at some point the question of how to recognize a spiritual witness. The answer is an unusual one for Latter-day Saints. Since we do not make traditional distinctions between spirit and matter, it follows that in some respects there are no differences between spiritual and material truth. Matter and spirit are one; therefore, truth should be one as well.

But finding spiritual truth is a compli-

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cated business. It involves our emotions, our openness to spiritual promptings, and our intellect. It requires practice, developing sensitivity, and above all, balance.

One of the common mistakes is to confuse spiritual truth with emotions or sentiment. Everyone has experienced in their wards the annual Sunday of emotional overload—Mother's Day. It commonly involves the Primary children singing several songs, a few tributes to motherhood and to specific mothers, and with it all, a lot of tears. Most go home feeling mellow and good.

A good cry in quite different contexts can make us feel mellow as well. I admit to a certain weakness for parades and marching bands. For some reason, when I see a well-

trained band marching down Main Street in Salt Lake City, I'm prone to choke up and shed a tear or two in spite of myself. No doubt we need a cry once in a while, and it makes us feel good to have one. But my feelings at seeing a marching band in a parade aren't very different from my feelings at hearing a wonderfully sentimental story about someone's mother. Does either one have to do with spiritual truth, or are we in both cases perhaps a bit off the mark?

Of course emotions and sentiment are often present at times of spiritual manifestation. Jesus wept and touched the emotions of the Book of Mormon peoples when blessing their children. (3 Ne. 17:18–23.) Most Latter-day Saints can testify of similar experiences. But because emotion and sentiment can often accompany spiritual outpourings, that does not mean that they engender spirituality. They are an effect, not a cause. And when we imagine that emotion or sentiment alone can lead us to spiritual understanding, we are in danger of buying into a counterfeit—of confusing cause and effect. Brother Brigham Young was much concerned about this possibility and spoke directly concerning it in 1853:

Mr. B. is a stormer to preach, and to work upon the sympathies of the people, and especially upon the tender feelings of the female portion of his congregation. He will tell about their children dying, and picture out the sufferings of the poor, tender creatures. He will tell about their husbands dying, and about wives dying, and how they are lying in the lowly and silent grave. Add to this subject, which is so thrilling to the sensations of mortals, a peculiar trembling, plaintive tone, and perhaps accompanied with a shower of tears streaming down the preacher's face, and it is well calculated to disturb the equilibrium of the naturally tenderhearted, throw them into tears and sobs, and make them suppose it is the operations of the Holy Spirit, when in reality *there is not one word of common sense or saving truth in all the preaching.*¹

In other words the sentiment, the emotions, the tears do not in and of themselves say that a thing is good and right.

On most occasions when we feel the Spirit, we experience it by the manifestation not of tears or sentiment, but a deep, controlled, and affirming spiritual prompting, described again in Third Nephi, when the

voice of the Father announced the presence of the Son. The voice was not harsh nor loud; indeed it was a small voice, but it "did pierce them that did hear to the center . . . and did cause their hearts to burn." (3 Ne. 11:2-3.) The burning sensation is a common one, in the bosom.

I felt those sensations powerfully when on my mission in California in 1960. I was baptizing a brother, Earl Hall. He was a big man, and I was fearful of how well I would be able to handle the mechanics of lifting him from the water. I felt a burning so strong in my chest that my hand moved instinctively to feel that place of warmth, but to my hand it felt no different from the rest of me. Again, when I was twenty-nine and a confirmed bachelor, I had a hard time making up my mind to give up the independence I had become accustomed to. I prayed to learn if I dared ask the woman I cared for so much to marry me. Again, I experienced the burning so strongly that I have not to this day had a moment's doubt that it was a manifestation of the Spirit and of spiritual truth. Most Latter-day Saints have had similar experiences. They happen often in temples. We took our oldest child, Timothy, to the dedication of the Jordan River Temple and were seated on folding chairs deep in the bowels of the structure, surrounded by air ducts and pipes. As President Hinckley read the dedicatory prayer, a tangible presence filled even those nether spaces, and we had a profound and unforgettable spiritual experience as we participated in the dedication.

It thus seems one of our most important tasks in seeking spiritual experiences and truths is to disentangle emotion and sentiment from deeper affirmation. But even this is not enough. As we seek spiritual truth, or even as we seek guidance in ordinary decisions of life, it is tempting to just put the matter into the hands of God. After all, we have the Holy Ghost; why not heighten our spiritual sensitivity to the point where we can let the Spirit direct us in all our affairs?

There is a good reason we cannot: The Spirit works by affirming, rarely by commanding. I would suspect this has something to do with the fact that mortality is a time of learning and preparation during which we learn to use the resources God has given us. Were the Spirit always to put words of counsel, instruction, or comfort into our minds without our preparing and seeking, we would be little more than automatons responding mechanically to its impulses. We would experience little growth and learning, and we could hardly be said to walk by faith. Mortality would be far less a time of testing

or learning.

Of all the resources God has given us, including our emotions and sentiments, the most unique and rare is our intellect: the prophets have called this the most central and eternal aspect of our being. We understand that the glory of God is intelligence or light and truth, and that if people gain more knowledge and intelligence in this life, they will have so much the advantage in the world to come. (D&C 93:36, 130:18-19.) Some have chosen to interpret these passages as referring to spiritual truth or spiritual intelligence only, but to do so denies the importance of our most wonderful and god-like gifts: the capacity to wonder, to question, to imagine, and to apply these experiences to seeking answers.

Perhaps no better example exists of the power of the intellect in spiritual understanding than the prophet Joseph Smith, himself. His first and subsequent visions were not occasions when God simply dropped in to pay a call. Joseph keenly observed the religious and social ferment around him and was greatly concerned about it. He attended meetings of the various churches, studied their doctrines, and, as he put it, "my mind was called up to serious reflection" (Joseph Smith 2:8) which led him tentatively to be partial to the Methodist faith, in spite of his mother's and siblings' partiality to Presbyterianism and his father's obstinate free thinking. It was after exploring every avenue available to his intellect and coming to a tentative conclusion that he determined to test the promise of James that those lacking wisdom would gain it through asking God. (James 1:5.) First he studied, then he prayed. The rest of his life he was always alert to new ideas, actively studying and absorbing knowledge and learning from any source available to him—seeking out instruction in ancient languages, convening a school of the prophets, designing the city of Zion surrounding a complex of temples, some of which were to comprise a center where men and women were to "seek learning by study and also by faith." (D&C 88:118.)

Perhaps there is no clearer guide in all our scriptures to the process of gaining spiritual understanding than Oliver Cowdery's 1829 failure to assist the prophet in translating the Book of Mormon. Oliver had received careful instructions (D&C 8) assuring him that he must ask in faith, with an honest heart, believing that he would receive knowledge concerning the engravings. But though he earnestly set out to meet all these conditions, he failed. Why?

You have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought. . . . (D&C 9: 8-9.)

This practical and workable method of seeking spiritual understanding combines our intellect, our spiritual powers, and at times even our emotions in gaining spiritual truths and insights. Perhaps the key here, as it is so often when we attempt to apply gospel principles to our everyday lives, is "moderation in all things." Here, as elsewhere, we must lengthen our stride, but be careful not to lose our balance. ☐

NOTE

1. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 1:241, emphasis in original.



BRIDAL WREATH

A single clump along a sloping hill
tumbles forward like a fountain
falling to the valley floor.
How the boughs askew
spear morning air—
a frothy windrow rolling wild
against a somber lawn-green sea.
Could we have known
how these roots loosely thrown
would break the earth apart
and shake the meadow's sleep
careening through the empty hollow
like a summer child's unbridled laughter?

—JEROME L. MCELROY