

## TRANSITIONS

THE PUBLIC THOUGHT OF  
ELBERT PECK*Reflections on the Occasion of His Departure from Sunstone**By Philip Barlow*

IT IS POSSIBLE to overestimate the rational intellect. As Goethe noted, “Humankind, divided by reason, leaves a remainder.” And, beyond the mere intellect, faith is a precious thing. Without some form of it, we do not successfully arise from our bed each morning. In my judgment, an utter loss of spiritual faith by those who have grown religiously tone-deaf is tragic.

Even so, there is little virtue in unconditional faith. Unquestioning faith is as easily induced in Muslims as in Christians; as readily sponsored in the children of Baptists or Nazis as in the children of Latter-day Saints. Unexamined faith shares responsibility not only for admirable acts of devotion and self-sacrifice, but also for layered superstition, for narrow lives zealously spent in misguided enterprises, and even for mass murder. Any faith worth retaining, any adult and ethical faith, must needs be “a thoughtful faith.”

If the “thought” part of “a thoughtful faith” is to nourish, sustain, and broaden our views, it will leave room for prayer, meditation, humility, and receptivity. Thought, however, requires courageous exploration, open, honest, and good-will dialogue with those of differing views, critical thinking, and a regard for thought that is disciplined, documented, and debatable. Questions press themselves: Faith in what? Why? Based on what? Applied how, and with what qualifications? What does *this* mean in light of these

facts, or of that circumstance, or of those conflicting principles?

To be both thoughtful and competent, sustainable faith requires of a community two things (beyond acts of worship, ritual, service, love, and shared experience). First, faith demands access to an open forum, where all inquiry is welcome, where the wisdom and truth of questions and their proposed answers can be weighed (and rejected or amended or embraced or extended). Second, sustainable faith needs a forum whose intent resembles that of the 11th-century thinker, St. Anselm, whose approach to theology is printed as the motto each year on the Sunstone Symposium program: “Faith Seeking Understanding.”

Please notice that an open forum is not necessarily identical to a forum guided by Faith Seeking Understanding. An open forum, whatever the intentions of its organizers, may include speakers who have little faith, or little understanding, or who are more interested in groaning, in self-promotion, or in launching cheap shots than they are in careful thinking. Likewise, a forum of Faith Seeking Understanding may be marred by defensiveness, insufficient rigor, unexamined suppositions, and subtle or not-so-subtle censorship. There is much overlap, but also certain tensions, between these two imperfect models of a forum or an ongoing symposium.

ANY sensitive person who is willing to assume the task of coordinating, negotiating, and presiding over this sort of gathering with its many tensions is apt to be both rewarded and bruised. If he or she were to bear this mantle for a long time, he or she might even become beat up or burned out, for the material pay is modest, the en-

ergy demands considerable, the intellectual, emotional, and social strains severe, and the criticism certain. A great many people owe a tremendous debt to Elbert Peck for what he has given of himself during the past fifteen years in the interest of facilitating human inquiry, spiritual growth, and the study of all things Mormon.

People may already value Elbert’s individual contributions to Mormon thought. (I don’t know, for I live in rural Indiana among its corn and tobacco plots but few humans. No one talks to me much out here.) But the notion occurs to me that because of Elbert’s position as SUNSTONE editor—which entails much orchestrating, cajoling, and editing—and because his own writing has primarily taken the form of editorials that are brief, unpretentious, and designed as “tracts for the times,” and they have not yet been gathered together under one binding, he may be remembered primarily as an intelligent and gregarious facilitator of many wonderful events, while his writing may fade into oblivion.

It would be a mistake for those of us who seek a thoughtful faith to let Brother Elbert’s thought fade in our group consciousness. I know that Elbert believes some things that I do not, and that I believe some things he does not. But wherever our debates might take us, I believe his thought warrants our ongoing attention. I will suggest why I think so by naming several motifs and traits of Elbert’s writing.

I will restrict myself to Elbert’s public thought. Doubtless he, like President Bush or President Hinckley or me or you, privately thinks and believes many things he chooses not to put in print. An interesting study would surely emerge from those ideas Elbert has not put into his editorials! Yet what he has written for publication is subject to our scrutiny. What follows, then, are observations based upon my review of his editorials in the magazine during the past decade and a half. I will restrict myself to five observations. You will do well to be skeptical of such a tidy number.

THE first theme I will call “applied intelligent compassion,” but which Elbert, with less fanfare, calls “cutting people some slack.” Here is an example: In 1991, not long after the public learned that many parts of Elder Paul H. Dunn’s thrilling and moving baseball and war stories were not true, there were many reactions: scandal, humor, sadness, a sense of betrayal, sympathy, and shock. Many loud whispers were heard, and much head-wagging took



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place throughout the Church. Elbert's reaction interests me. His published ambivalence left a trail of more "on the other hands" than one might easily count. Elbert was careful not to condone lying for the Lord, and he argued strenuously for the primacy of truth and the precariousness of a faith grounded on illusion, yet he nonetheless did a remarkable thing. His honesty and generosity and willingness to be publicly vulnerable led him to identify with Elder Dunn in an important respect. In his editorial for the September 1991 issue, Elbert put it this way:

Some time ago I attempted to write a short story about missionary life. . . . I took two powerful real-life experiences, one at the start of my mission and another just before I was released, and combined them into one event in the fictional story. To get the story so that it would describe and evoke the feelings I wanted readers to feel, I worked on it for over a week. For several hours each night I sat at the computer reading and rereading the narrative, changing words, rewriting sentences, then reading it out loud again. In my attempt to elicit the genuine emotions I had felt on my mission, I found myself living the fictional creation in my mind, even when I wasn't working on it. . . . I eventually produced a story that was authentic for me, but alas, not for any other reader. I abandoned the project.

Weeks later, while in conversation over dinner with some friends, I commented, "That's just like an experience I had on my mission . . ." and I began to relate, in all honesty, the fictional story I had earlier created. Halfway through the telling, shocked, I suddenly realized that I wasn't telling my real-life experience. Blushing, in the rush of embarrassment and confusion, I said, "No, that's not what happened to me. . . . What did happen? . . ." I queried myself, perplexed. Briefly, my friends looked at me bemused, and perhaps worried. Fortunately, one of them said something and the conversation moved on, leaving me alone to untangle this internal mystery in my mind. It took some time to

divorce the married stories and restore them to their proper place in my mission narrative. I vividly remember that discomfiting event (I hope correctly) because I was stunned by how guilelessly I believed the myth I was vigorously telling. I realized that if I had gotten away with that performance a few more times I may never have been able to reconstruct the "truth," even if I had a good missionary journal (which I don't, so now I am not that confident that the two separate stories are indeed factually accurate, but I'm quite sure that something like them did happen.)

As a whole, Elbert's essay is subtle and balanced. The rest of it, like the part I have shared, comes from a generous soul.

**E**LBERT believes The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a source and a force for enormous good in the world because of its practical fruits. They are impressive, and Elbert follows Jesus in finding such fruit an important criterion for attention. "The genius of the Church," he wrote in his final editorial (April 2001), "is how it recreates the interconnected Mormon pioneer village in each modern ward, how it interweaves the lives of its members." Agreeing with Eugene England, and in contrast to popular understanding, Elbert comes close to suggesting that just as the practical outranks mere theory, the Church is truer than the gospel. Where "community" is increasingly difficult to achieve in the modern world, Mormonism engenders community and franchises it. Hence, exploring the nature, challenges, joys, and implications of Zion is a second Peck preoccupation. For him, if one can grasp the inspiration of Mormon community-building, one grasps what is best in the enterprise Joseph Smith launched. Elbert believes that, despite the risk of intellectual smothering, homogenization, boring services and classes, and exaggerated claims to exclusive truth, each Mormon ward becomes a workshop for love.

**I**F the best part of the Church is the partially realized reach for Zion, Elbert's commitment to this virtue is everywhere

balanced by a third theme: his plea for tolerance, his call for the celebration of diversity and inclusion. For example, after reflecting warmly on the inspiring acceptance and love in which he had basked in two communities—an LDS ward and a gathering of New Age gay pagans—Elbert, in his April 2001 editorial, mourned the irony that each of these loving communities would find the other off-putting, and even immoral. Then came a revelation, a thunderclap: "The presence of love within a community, does not prove it is Christian." He cites Jesus: "If you love those who love you, what reward can you expect? Even the tax collectors do as much as that. . . . Even the heathen do as much" (Matthew 5: 46-47, Rev. English Bible). To be Christian, love must transcend the bounds of ideological coziness; it must extend even to one's enemies.

Elbert's thrust here could sponsor a rich conversation, for "tolerance" and "inclusiveness" can be oppressive clichés in the hands of the "politically correct" thought police. I wonder whether the principles of tolerance and inclusion themselves can prove that a community is Christian. Jesus Christ conditioned with additional principles his culture-rattling, history-changing demonstration that love must not rule only among like-minded people. He did, after all, spend a good portion of his ministry calling people to repentance—and not always in polite language. Toleration and inclusion of diverse people may be right and proper, but they did not necessarily entail, for Jesus, a nondiscriminatory embrace of all human behaviors. Thus Elbert's notion above, like all good, provocative thought, has sufficient power to incite constructive discussion on an issue too pressing for responsible contemporaries to ignore.

Elbert's preoccupation with inclusion has several dimensions—democratic ones in particular. He laments for instance that, for all the *talking*, our LDS notion of General "Conference" has so little *conferring*. Elbert himself extends an inclusive and conferring reach far and wide to all. But my favorite passage in Elbert's diffuse campaign for inclusiveness reveals that he himself wants to be included. This comes out in his writing as a

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humble, non-combative, but persistent position. Drawing, perhaps, on his love of Thomas Jefferson, Elbert writes: “I prefer to see myself as a citizen in God’s republic rather than as a subject in God’s kingdom. The first metaphor calls out better things in me. Citizens matter; the social body requires their daily, free-will contributions” (September 1996).

If we had time, we might consider other topics that dominate the editorials: the integrity of doubt in a context of faith; doubt resolved less by intellectual certainty than by living and serving; the importance of reason tempered by the insistence that scholarship and discourse be charitable; an urging to be active in public life; the overflowing goodness of God and grace; the resilient absolutes from the Sermon on the Mount to forgive, to not judge, to live simply, to attend to the poor.

**B**UT rather than elaborate more themes here, I will ask you to think about two aspects of Elbert’s work that affect all his themes. The first of these is that his writing displays an “achieved simplicity.” This theme is important, and must be distinguished from being simple-minded. Let me explain.

A few years back, I joined colleagues at Hanover College in team-teaching a megacourse called Eurasia. On one occasion, I was to lead a discussion on what may be the most challenging poem in the English language: T. S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland.” The almost-perverse difficulty of the poem prompted me to ask a campus friend, an expert in literature, the question, “What is poetry?” After a minute, she proffered the best response I’ve heard: “Poetry, is music, imagery, and compression.”

When I say that Elbert achieves simplicity, I mean that he compresses. The result is not simplistic but simple. To see this, one needs to know that Elbert Peck has a capacious mind. He is extraordinarily well-read. He can recite much of Robert Frost from memory. He is unusually adept with the scriptures, including the Bible’s various translations. He is in touch with what is going on with other faiths and understands something of their history and theology and language. When such a mind as his successfully forges

thought into simple form, an element of poetry is at work—something analogous to what scientists mean when they call “elegant” a formula that comprehends and conquers complexity by succinct expression.

One way Elbert expresses this achieved simplicity is his penchant for making lists: two dozen *do’s* and *don’t’s* for Mormons that would make our church services and communal life better (September 1996) for instance, or one hundred things he has learned from being editor of SUNSTONE (December 1995). Anyone can conjure lists, of course—my house and office are full of them. And Elbert’s lists, while he avoids elaborating the obvious, are full of small as well as great matters. Hence, an undiscerning ear is not apt to hear what is profound there. But as a list-maker myself, I can testify that constructing good lists is rather more difficult than it may sound. Even the small items on Elbert’s lists seem to me a consequence of careful thought and phrasing.

Before sampling thoughts from his lists, I’ll give one more example to show what I mean about the potentially important difference brought to bear by carefully crafted phrasing. Let us not mistake simplicity for superficiality.

A year or so back, my mother-in-law took a horrifying misstep, fell, and died. In the weeks afterward, many kind friends extended their sympathy to this mother’s aching children and husband: “I am so sorry.” “How awful.” “What a tragedy.” What can one say at such a time? One cannot quite bring oneself to say nothing, and yet speech seems doomed. This was all the more apparent in far away Indiana, where many kind people, who had not known the deceased mother, offered sincere sentiments to her traumatized daughter. In this context, I was on one occasion captured by the simple but distinctive expression of concern voiced by a casual acquaintance. Rather than, “I’m so sorry,” this woman asked gently, “What was your mother like?” This was not the only good thing to say at such a time, so do not misunderstand me as attempting to create a formula. But perhaps you can see that this query, in this context, created space for an anguished daughter to give something back, to honor her mother in that moment.

If you are with me so far in distinguishing

“simple” from “simplistic,” we are prepared to appreciate the achieved simplicity of Elbert Peck’s public thought, the extreme version of which is his impulse to make lists of compressed conclusions. For example, inspired by H. Jackson Brown Jr’s small work, *Life’s Little Instruction Book*, Elbert undertook in the September 1996 issue to shape a list of simple “rules . . . that will make a qualitative difference in our lives and the lives of fellow yoke-bearers.” “I’m not Moses,” he wrote, and acknowledged that in constructing his list, he had experimented by forming many laws, which he had then discarded as trivial or obvious (such as “respect meetinghouse property”) or others that were mere “personal gripes, hobby-horses, and . . . matters of personal style” (such as the suggestion that we should “change the sacrament water to grape juice”). Of the surviving suggestions—of the innumerable things that one might think of to live by in our communal religious life—the first item on Elbert’s list of *do’s* and *don’t’s* for Saints is: “Compliment quality: a beautiful organ prelude, a moving lesson, an inspiring sermon, and any ward newspaper.” (This last item no doubt derives from the strain of producing a magazine himself.)

The simple suggestion of “complimenting quality,” if one considers the whole of Elbert’s thought, interests me a good deal. We can see it is a constructive suggestion rather than a tearing down. It has behind it, further down the same list, another Peckish point: “Assume most people feel inadequate; speak encouraging words.”

But for Elbert, encouragement does not entail encouraging mediocrity—which our non-professional, do-it-yourself church culture can inadvertently foster—nor does it encourage dishonest praise. And his stress on *quality* is particularly important. I have argued on my own campus that the acquired ability to distinguish quality from the infinite number of pretenders offered us by our culture (including, sometimes, our educational institutions and our religions) may be the most profound reward of a liberal arts education. Indeed, I have read one Hebrew scholar who argues that the best translation of the allusion to the tree from which Adam and Eve partook is not the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil,” but the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad.” That is, human progress is

conditioned not only on moral distinctions, but also on the ability to distinguish good from bad quality generally. (If you don't know what I mean, go reread Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, whose philosophy of quality already, decades ago, outflanked the current culture wars of postmodernism.) In any event, Elbert has a gift for recognizing bad- and good-quality thought and scholarship, and he has not been overawed by an author's reputation or high office, nor does he yield to the pressure tactics of some or another "ism."

Elbert's list offers another simple thought, a practical suggestion for improving public prayer: "Don't preach when praying publicly; speak conversationally and briefly." This much may be obvious, though, as church members, we are erratic in our practice. But Elbert goes on: "In your public prayer, concretely answer these questions: What do we truly yearn for? And how has God touched our lives?" Small, simple—and perhaps enough, if followed, to change the tenor of our prayer worship.

A SECOND trait influencing most of the editorials—the last aspect I'll consider here—is that Elbert has combined a sort of spiritual entrepreneurship with his commitment to the importance of grassroots participation. This means that his editorials are not pontification, but rather

invitation. His list of *do's* and *don'ts* for Saints, for example, is not a pretense to fix the Church once and for all, but is rather an attempt to induce all thoughtful Saints to generate their own lists—which Elbert was willing to consider publishing—in the interest of getting all of us to think concretely about being better citizens in God's Republic. Similar efforts at religious democracy include Elbert's experiments in trying to get readers to craft and publish their own psalms and prayers; the introduction in the magazine of sections valuing and trying to stimulate the participation of new and younger contributors; and Elbert's launch of regional symposiums.

As Brother Elbert surrenders the editorial helm of the magazine and direction of the symposiums, I honor his labors. He has, during his tenure, sought balance and fairness, devoting countless hours trying to recruit believing, faithful Saints to participate in open conversation. While insisting on the necessity of honest religious and scholarly probing, he has generally said "no" when he should have and has subsequently endured, with grace and strength, the lashes of those who would want these forums to be shaped only in their political or theological image. He has been, as one friend observed, the unofficial bishop to a great many Saints who have felt themselves wounded through more-official channels and policies. He has cham-

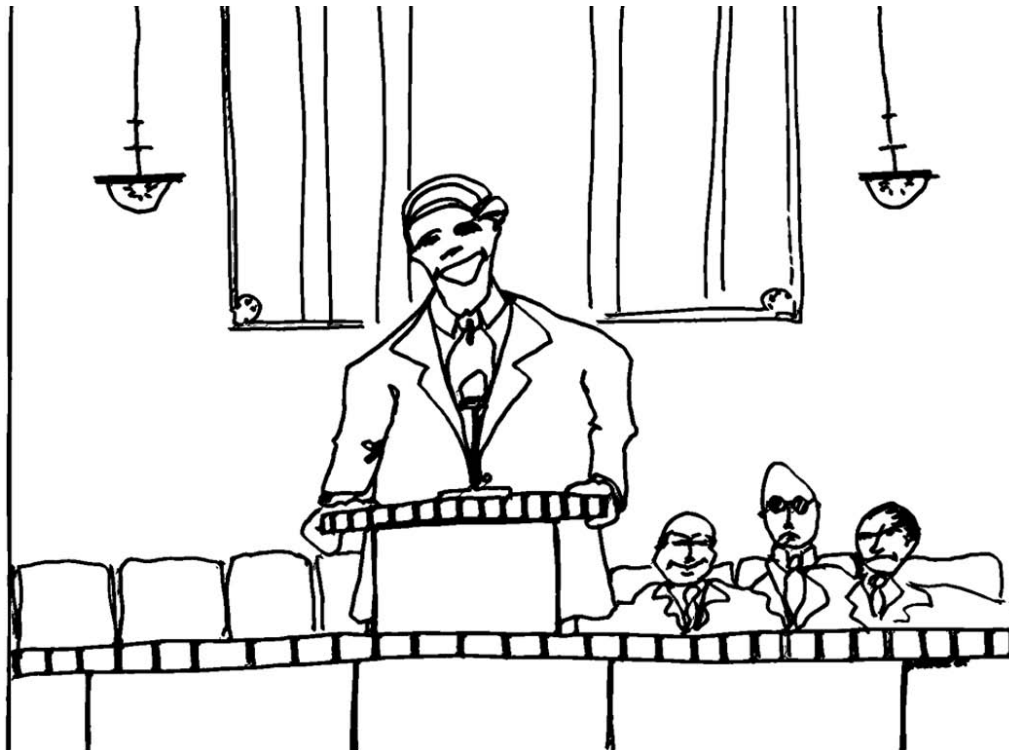
pioned the cause of reason and honesty and generosity and competence in religious discourse. He has construed quite literally the Book of Mormon maxim that "When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God." And despite a long-term, relentless engagement with conflicting forces of daunting strength that could drive most any of us into depression, he has, over the years, retained a ready laugh.

SUNSTONE culture, at its worst, *debunks*. Sunstone, at its best, *inquires*. Inquiry is driven by questions, and at the core of the idea of questioning is a *quest*. The deepest expression of the quest is to know "what it means to be human"; to know, in our context, "what it means to be a Latter-day Saint"; to probe what it entails to do those things with increasing awareness—more honestly, more nobly, more faithfully—"to better serve our God."

In the end, not every Peck editorial is a classic. And his own interests, of course, inform his writing. But as imperfect as he is, there remain enduring aspects of the published thought of Elbert Peck that promote that task of discovering our humanity, our Sainthood, and our God.

*Don't throw away your old Sunstones!* ☺

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