

## FROM THE EDITOR

## SAVING THE WHOLE WORLD

By Dan Wotherspoon

• Our great thanks to everyone who helped make this year's Sunstone Northwest Symposium such a great success! Molly Bennion was once more our unflappable, good-humored coordinator and gracious host. And Elke and Patrick McKenzie were wonderful, hosting an informal gathering of Sunstone friends in their home the night before.

• This issue sees the launch of two new columns. Alan and Vickie Eastman have graciously agreed to become the editors of a new *Cornucopia* column, "Righteous Dominion" (see page 14 for a description and invitation to send your stories). We're also pleased to introduce Michael Nielsen as a new contributing columnist. We've agreed to call his occasional reflections, "Nonstandard Deviations," (page 60) as a fun nod to his work as a social scientist and statistics teacher, but I trust you'll find his gentle ways and careful observations are anything but deviant.

**B**ESIDES THE CHANCE I had to meet with so many great folks at this year's Northwest symposium, my trek to Seattle came with an additional perk for me, for it brought me back to my mission field for the first time in seventeen years. Like most returned missionaries who've been home a while, I don't think about my mission very much any more. This trip has convinced me that, in my case at least, this is a mistake. So many of the best things in my life have been a direct result of my having served a mission.

As I've taken the chance to reframe my mission these past few weeks, I've thought a lot about the recent shift in the missionary program, as reflected in Elder M. Russell Ballard's remarks during the priesthood session of October general conference:

We don't need spiritually weak and semicommitted young men. We don't need you to just fill a position. . . . This isn't a time for spiritual weaklings. We cannot send you on a mission to be reactivated, reformed, or to receive a testimony. We just don't have time for that. . . . Tonight we call upon you, our young brethren of the Aaronic Priesthood, to rise up, to measure

up, and to be fully prepared to serve the Lord. . . . The bar that is the standard for missionary service is being raised. The day of the "repent and go" missionary is over. . . .

Upon you bishops and you stake presidents rests the responsibility to recommend only those young men and women whom you judge to be spiritually, physically, mentally, and emotionally prepared to face today's realities of missionary work. Brethren, judge wisely. . . .

I'm in complete agreement with much of the thinking behind the effort to "raise the bar" for missionary service. We as a church will be better served by missionaries who enter the field with a strong understanding of the gospel and who are fully committed to serve others. And I'm especially pleased with what appears to be a growing understanding among Church leaders that perhaps the choice to serve a full-time mission isn't right for every young person. Local leaders should look at each individual's spiritual, physical, and emotional fitness before recommending them for service. As they fill out the paper work, leaders shouldn't be thinking: "Well, nothing else has worked. Let's try a mission."<sup>1</sup>

I confess, though, that I've struggled a bit with Elder Ballard's remarks. Not so much with the remarks themselves, actually, but with how they might be understood. I would hope that concern for the preparedness of missionaries doesn't altogether spell the end for the idea that "missions are as much for the missionaries themselves as they are for the work the missionaries perform." I would hate to see this latest bar-raising as an instance of institutional goals and efficiencies working against the personal development or welfare of the individuals the institution is supposed to be serving. I can see how missionary department leaders might be tempted to think "Sixty thousand missionaries are enough; let's only take the cream of the crop." I hope this otherwise positive development isn't being driven by "corporate think." I hope Elder Ballard's comment, "we just don't have time for that"—in reference to reactivating or re-

forming missionaries—don't cause us to lose sight of the importance of a mission as a place for conscientious young people to become more committed, mature, and spiritual.

My struggle with this policy shift is also personal. In my recent replaying of my mission experiences, I have not been able to escape worrying that, depending on the way different local leaders interpret Elder Ballard's message, under this new mindset, I might never have been given the chance to serve.

The Talmud contains a passage that has been on my mind as I've reflected on my mission and the potential complexities of this new set of standards:

If any man has caused a single soul to perish, Scripture imputes it to him as though he had caused the whole world to perish. And if any man saves alive a single soul, Scripture imputes it to him as though he had saved the whole world. (Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 4.5)

This teaching—that killing or saving a person, either physically or spiritually, irrevocably alters the "whole world" that follows or does not now follow from that person—is something I pray each Church leader will bear in mind as they apply the principles Elder Ballard laid out.

**I** JOINED the missionary ranks pretty late in the game. I was just a few months shy of twenty-four when I arrived in Seattle. But the whole world that followed my mission owes its genesis to the generosity of two people, George and Janie Wright, who made the insane decision to invite their smelly, unhappy, downward-spiraling twenty-two-year-old nephew to live with them and their family in Mapleton, Utah.

I had become the sad person I was then through what suspect is a fairly typical path. High school rebellion picked up steam as post-graduation pressures to grow up increased in intensity. Since, as age nineteen approached, I absolutely did not want to become a missionary, I naturally began partying even harder. I had determined to make sure my bishop wouldn't even consider me as a candidate for a mission. Over the next several years, I occasionally made gestures toward growing up, but one by one, I found myself crossing every behavior line I had ever drawn for myself as the "furthest I will ever go." By the time the Wrights invited me into their home, I felt trapped. I couldn't find the strength to break away from the friends I hung with, and I had pretty well convinced myself I would never be able to pull out of the ruts I was in.

Slowly but surely, the dynamics of living with a happy family worked its magic on me. I loved my cousins, all younger than me, and I wanted them to think better of me than I did of myself, so I made sure to smoke only in my car (as if they didn't have noses!). Away from old friends and patterns, I wanted desperately to make the most of my new chance in other ways, and I began to try the church thing again. After living with the Wrights for about half a year, my aunt and I attended BYU Education Week together, and something said there motivated me to read the Book of Mormon. The book worked a miracle, screaming to me from every page that I *could* change, that it still wasn't too late for me to become a useful person.

The next thing I knew, I was sitting at the breakfast table with my uncle and heard the words come out of my mouth that I wanted to go on a mission. *That* got his attention! He happened to be my bishop, so we grabbed our juice and went down the hall to his study and got busy working on making it happen. I guess I wasn't a "repent and go" missionary in the sense that Elder Ballard meant in his remarks—I hadn't made it part of my "plan"—but I will be forever grateful that I had a bishop who understood me and knew that, despite my less-than-promising prologue, both the Church *and* I would be blessed by my serving.

**R**ETURNING to the Talmud: no one can predict what worlds will follow from our actions. I doubt the Wrights believed they were doing much beyond acting on a prompting that had told them they might somehow be able to "help Dan." Well, worlds *have* followed.

**WORLD ONE:** I met my wife, Lorri, while on my mission to Seattle. She was then Sister Hubbard—one of the sharpest sisters in my first zone. We both remember thinking the other person was a good missionary, but our hearts didn't get all aflutter until we'd both been home for more than a year and were asked to head up the committee to plan the next year's mission reunions. That was November 1985. We married March 1986, three weeks before the first reunion we helped arrange. Our world now includes two unique, talented, funny, and wonderful children, Alex and Hope. I've got a good feeling that good and beautiful worlds will someday spring from them as well.

**WORLD TWO.** Following my mission, I was blessed with the chance to teach for two-and-a-half years at the Missionary Training Center in Provo, working with se-

nior couple and sister missionaries. One day, after dismissing my district for the day, we came upon a small group in the hallway gathered around a sister lying on the ground. Her husband and another elder were administering to her and, by the time I arrived, had reached the point in the blessing where they'd said all the essential things. But she was still in trouble. Her lips and fingers were turning blue, and something inside me made me touch her husband's shoulder and ask him to close the blessing. Just as he did, I caught the eye of the arriving MTC nurse and, without an extra word, we assessed the sister's situation. She was not breathing, nor did she have a pulse or blood pressure. We began two-person CPR, which thankfully kept her going for several minutes until paramedics and the miracle of a defibrillator took over.<sup>2</sup> My understanding is that this sister later received a pacemaker, and she and her husband were able to serve their mission to England.

**WORLD THREE.** It is impossible for me to fully thank my aunt and uncle for all they did for me, but I'm excited that I had the opportunity to be a player in their getting blessed back just a little. While living with the Wrights, I got to know my cousin, Amy, well enough to write to her from the mission field (my exact words): "Cancel all your boyfriends. You have to marry my companion, Elder [Scott] Phister." That would have been a pretty dumb story except for the fact that

Amy and Scott *did* get married and now have five children and one of the truly great relationships I've ever witnessed up close. They live in Riverton, Wyoming, and George and Janie moved this summer from Mapleton to Wyoming to spend their golden years nearer this fun gang.

**I** AM one of those people whose brain begins to hurt when I think too long about eternity, really big numbers, or infinite space. So, I've been hesitant to think much about God's promises that one day we might create "worlds without number." I'm less afraid to consider that now. I think, for all of us, this kind of work has already begun.



#### NOTES

1. Sunstone has hosted two extremely interesting panels in the past two Salt Lake symposiums dealing with this complex subject. See "Coming Home: Challenges Faced by Returning Missionaries" (tape #SL01-276) and "Ostracize, Condone, or Congratulate? What to do When Missionaries Come Home Early?" (tape #SL02-172). Scott Kenney's recent article about a young Joseph F. Smith shows that, at least in the case of this future Church president, the decision made by exasperated leaders to send him on a mission to help him grow up was a good one (SUNSTONE, Nov. 2001, p. 23, 25, and note 26.)

2. During one of my false starts at being a grown-up before my mission, I had received training as an Emergency Medical Technician.



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