

SOME REFLECTIONS AT WINTER QUARTERS

Richard E. Bennett

On this Memorial Day weekend, it is altogether fitting and appropriate that we gather today at this sacred place to remember the lives of our progenitors everywhere. From Gettysburg to Hiroshima, from Arlington to Flanders Field, and from the city cemetery to the family plot, we honor our dead ancestors and friends long since stilled. Whether they died on the battle fields of war or perished in the labor of giving birth, we honor them. Whether on the trail to a new life in Oregon or a new chance in the Ukraine, they all were the lifeline to our present bright day. So today we come to express appreciation and to reflect—each in his or her own way.

I am honored to say a few words on behalf of all of you here at Mormonism's other sacred grove. Though not a descendant of any of those buried here or anywhere else along the trail of exodus, I am a willing participant of their faith. I well remember my first visit here forty-one years ago and my boyish impatience at searching a cemetery. The Hill Cumorah was exciting. Nauvoo was inspiring. But this was a sad and a lonely place with losses all around. Why ever stop here?

You might well agree with me that there are several sites in Latter-day Saint history that convey a special feeling, a certain meaning, each in its own way: the Sacred Grove and the dawning of a bright new day; Kirtland, Ohio, and the turning of the hearts from generation to generation; Independence, Missouri, and the temples of our God; and This is the Place and its celebration of sacrifice and discovery. These sites and many more we celebrate in song and in pageant, as well perhaps we should.

Yet there were never any celebrations at Winter Quarters. Even in my childhood, I sensed the deepening trial of their lengthening trail. It was too sacred to celebrate and too meaningful to recall in any other way but in worshipful remembrance.

Much has changed since then. Our understanding and appreciation of this place in Latter-day Saint life and thought have broadened considerably. Books have been written. Traces of early nearby villages have been located. Beautiful new buildings have been erected nearby and old ones carefully restored. Winter Quarters is no longer a weak and retiring step-sister in our history. Whether the reorganization of the First Presidency under Brigham Young or the call of the Mormon Battalion, so much of a positive nature has been rediscovered here at the Missouri—never again to be forgotten.

Nevertheless, there is an essential quality to the memory of this place that will never be altered or pass away. While it may be unfair and inaccurate to remember only the trials, disease, and death that characterized the Latter-day Saint stay here at the Missouri Bluffs, its essential mission and message will forever remain.

So what is that message? And what is it about this place that holds us so, like a collective conscience to our historical inquiries, a heavy anchor to our lofty speculations?

May I suggest that in our commendable quest for historical face, the length and breadth of it all, that we not look beyond the mark or complicate its lasting sim-

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plicity. There may well be more truth found more often in faith than in fact. We now know why they died—from malnutrition, exposure, scurvy, and malaria. We now know, more or less, how many died both here and all along the Iowa trail. And we know so much more than we did before about the history of the Restoration: the men and the women, the ebb and flow, them and us.

I believe that after everything, Winter Quarters is the very heart of faith, the last great sacrifice of devotion. Unlike so many others of their fellow westering emigrants in search of new lands and individual opportunity and enhancement, many of whose graves are likewise lined across the cemetery of the trail, those who died here were on a faith-full exodus to a new somewhere.

This was no cult of charismatic leadership, no fanatic fringe following to the final end, no seeking after death in a misguided zeal of commitment. Rather, it was quiet, measured devotion. Winter Quarters was and ever will be a testament to the simple faith of the Latter-day Saints in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, in the divinely sponsored calling of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and in the revealed new word of God in the Book of Mormon. While due credit must be given to the leadership skills of Brigham Young and his colleagues, this was a faith of all the people. These were a people who were wont to be led, with a simple, profound and enduring faith, conviction, and testimony. And they would find their place if they followed their God! To miss this point is to misunderstand this place.

May I also suggest that Winter Quarters tells us that there is more to life than the quest for gain and fortune. Enveloped as we are in a culture of competition and consumption, where success is so often measured by the bank book and the stock portfolio, we may easily lose sight of what is of lasting importance. It is all in the cause that motivates us. We make our own journeys through life either with or without purpose. To be driven for anything less than a good and noble and righteous cause, or to allow ourselves to be distracted or deflected by the every-day busyness of it all, may bring a far

greater tragedy than death. The single-minded pursuit of wealth or academic knowledge at the expense of faith, hope, and charity and of character leads to a less-satisfying destination. For those Latter-day Saints whose journey ended here, at least their direction was right. And direction, in the end, means everything. As the Savior said, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Brigham Young may once again have said it best when, at the height of the Saints' misery and sufferings here at the Missouri, he sounded the following in his characteristically plain and unflinching terms:

We are willing to take our full share of troubles, trials, losses and crosses, hardships and fatigues, warnings and watchings, for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake. And feel to say: Come, calm or strife, turmoil or peace, life or death, in the name of Israel's God we mean to conquer or die trying.

Whatever our religious persuasion, our citizenship, or our political affiliation, is there not a message here for each one of us in our own trails and trials? There may be worse things than cemeteries: a lost or misplaced faith, a broken covenant, a forgotten affection, a conscience seared. What may have been taken away or allowed to die in our own life need not end that way. Just as the pioneers sang "But if our lives are spared again," we can take renewed strength and make renewed commitment. We are yet alive, as is God, our Eternal Father. He still sees the little sparrow fall. We can yet walk tall and refind ourselves and our mission and rediscover the Spirit of God. "Be thou humble and the Lord thy God shall lead thee by the hand and give thee answers to thy prayers."

I now come to this cemetery with renewed purpose. Though a place of death, it is not one of defeat. It symbolizes for me, and perhaps for you, a quiet victory of endurance and of overcoming. It is more of hope and less of despair, more of faith and less of fact. God bless us all.