



Type: Journal Article

The Power of the Written Word

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Source: *Religious Educator*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2014), pp. 14–23

Published by: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University

Abstract: In this war in which we are engaged, this fight over good and evil that began in heaven and continues on earth, we do not have a lot of weapons, certainly not the weapons traditionally granted to armies or navies or corporations or governments. To accomplish our purposes we don't, at least in the ecclesiastical realm, hire people or fire people. We don't yell at them or harangue them (at least we're not supposed to), and we don't force them to do anything. In a purely gospel sense, we not only can't force anyone to do anything, we shouldn't. Irony of ironies is that this issue is what part of that premortal fight was about. So how do we motivate, inspire, stimulate, and move others? We are left with one principal asset— words. Energized by the Spirit and expressed with love, words are the only real sword we have in this divine battle.



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Elder Jeffrey R. Holland

The Power of the Written Word

ELDER JEFFREY R. HOLLAND

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Address at Symposium for Writers and Editors of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, October 15, 2013.

It would be fun simply to talk about writing and language and literature in the abstract, but in light of the demands in your life and mine, I am afraid we don't really have time for that. Virtually everything I have felt to say to you has something to do with gospel writing or writing for Church purposes—the kind of writing that brings you together for this conference. Maybe another day with greater leisure we could talk about the world's great literature and how grateful we are for those women and men who wrote it. Today let me be a little more focused and talk about you and the Church in the twenty-first century.

Ever since my youth I have been impressed with Paul's call to all of us to be clothed with the "armour of God." He said:

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.

Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high *places*.

Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness;

And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace;

Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.

And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Ephesians 6:10–17)

My point in noting this familiar call to arms is that it doesn't say very much about, well, arms. It says a lot about armor—about breastplates and helmets and shields of protection—but not much by way of weapons. In fact if I read it correctly, there is only one element of offense mentioned in a metaphor otherwise devoted entirely to defense. The one actual weapon we are given is “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17). Indeed Paul goes on to plead that “utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak” (Ephesians 6:19–20).

In this war in which we are engaged, this fight over good and evil that began in heaven and continues on earth, we do not have a lot of weapons, certainly not the weapons traditionally granted to armies or navies or corporations or governments. To accomplish our purposes we don't, at least in the ecclesiastical realm, hire people or fire people. We don't yell at them or harangue them (at least we're not supposed to), and we don't force them to do anything. In a purely gospel sense, we not only can't force anyone to do anything, we shouldn't. Irony of ironies is that this issue is what part of that premortal fight was about. So how do we motivate, inspire, stimulate, and move others? We are left with one principal asset—words. Energized by the Spirit and expressed with love, words are the only real sword we have in this divine battle.

I have always loved this excerpt from lecture 7 of the *Lectures on Faith*. The Prophet Joseph and the early brethren taught:

When a man works by faith he works by mental exertion instead of physical force. It is by words, instead of exerting his physical powers, with which every being works when he works by faith. God said, “Let there be light: and there was light.” Joshua



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spake, and the great lights which God had created stood still. Elijah commanded, and the heavens were stayed for the space of three years and six months, so that it did not rain: he again commanded and the heavens gave forth rain. All this was done by faith. And the Saviour says, "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, say to this mountain, 'Remove,' and it will remove; or say to that sycamine tree, 'Be ye plucked up, and planted in the midst of the sea,' and it shall obey you." Faith, then, works by words; and with these its mightiest works have been, and will be, performed.¹

We see that linkage between faith and words throughout the scriptures. Alma 32 is traditionally known as a great lecture on faith and it is. But you know that the seed Alma plants in that little parable, the seed that grows into the tree of life, is the word. Alma says, "God is merciful unto all who believe on his name; therefore he desireth, in the first place, that ye should believe, yea, even on his word" (Alma 32:22). And a little later: "Behold, if ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of my words. Now, we will compare the word unto a seed" (Alma 32:27–28).

Later as the Book of Mormon moves toward its completion Mormon bears this testimony:

Yea, we see that whosoever will may lay hold upon the word of God, which is quick and powerful, which shall divide asunder all the cunning and the snares and the wiles of the devil, and lead the man of Christ in a strait and narrow course across that everlasting gulf of misery which is prepared to engulf the wicked—

And land their souls, yea, their immortal souls, at the right hand of God in the kingdom of heaven. (Helaman 3:29–30)

If you will allow me to crisscross the Book of Mormon chronologically, one of the most pleading testimonies of all comes in the first few pages of the book. Laman and Lemuel ask Nephi:

What meaneth the rod of iron which our father saw, that led to the tree?

And I said unto them that it was the word of God; and whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction.

Wherefore, I, Nephi, did exhort them to give heed unto the word of the Lord; yea, I did exhort them with all the energies of my soul, and with all the faculty which I possessed, that they would give heed to the word of God and remember to keep his commandments always in all things. (1 Nephi 15:23–25)

Now, I suppose it would be presumptuous for any of us to say that what we write is the “word of God” as described in these passages, but I think it is okay for us to say we are at least writing “words of God,” thoughts God wants us to have, expressions He has put into our minds in order that we might put them into the minds of others. For that reason, I don’t want anyone in this room ever to underestimate the task that he or she has been given. We are in the business of building faith, and when a man or a woman works by faith, he or she works by words. Yes, there is power in the written word: “And now, as the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them—therefore Alma thought it was expedient that they should try the virtue of the word of God” (Alma 3 1:5).

So what if we—or others—didn’t write? It is not lost on any of us that it was imperative for Lehi to send his sons back to Jerusalem to obtain the brass plates. You know that story and the anguish involved in doing it, but the record was crucially important—so much so that the painful prospect of one man perishing physically had to be measured against an entire nation dwindling in unbelief. Underscoring this important decision is the reminder that when Mosiah sent his people back to find the people of Zarahemla, the latter were in spiritual and cultural darkness because they did not have the written word. Their language and their faith had become corrupted, it says, because “they had brought no records with them” (Omni 1:17).

Unlike you, I preach more than I write these days. But we both use words. My task—and in spirit yours as well—gets some emphasis from this little dialectical argument by the Apostle Paul:

For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? . . .

So then faith *cometh* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

But I say, Have they not heard? Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world. (Romans 10:13–14, 17–18)

Well, my dear friends, that’s kind of the business we are in here as writers, teachers, and preachers of the word. We are trying to take this message “unto the ends of the world,” and I am grateful to you for doing that so ably. Let me say just a few things about your work, and then we will conclude. First, writing is, at least for me, extremely hard work, and it never seems to get easier. I

suppose it is a cliché to say (but we must remember that clichés are true even though they are clichéd) that a blank page is still the most terrifying thing in the world for a writer. Getting started, getting something down on the page is the most difficult step we take, but we have to make ourselves begin. The key is not worrying that what first stares back at you is absolutely horrible—unreadable. My marvelous high school English teacher, Juanita Brooks, she of Mountain Meadows Massacre fame, told me a dozen times in those formative years of my education: “Jeff, you better learn right now that there is no such thing as good writing. There is only good rewriting. So do it over.” Maybe some of you can get it right the first time, but I can’t and I don’t know of very many other people who can. So don’t get hung up about how to begin. Just start. It won’t be good, whatever you write. Just plan on that. Write, rewrite, and rewrite.

But that is okay. It is part of the deal. It was the magnificent Samuel Johnson who once said that “what is written without effort is in general read without pleasure.”² So if we expect a serious response from the reader, I suppose it is only fair that it will require a serious effort by the author. In calling for good old hard work and asking for your willingness to go through a couple of dozen drafts, I remind you that, for the most part, the bulk of the world’s literature has been nudged forward not by show horses that pranced through the paragraphs, but by broad-shouldered oxen that just keep grunting and pulling. When King Ptolemy asked for an easier way of learning mathematics, Euclid is said to have replied that there is “no royal road to geometry.”³ By the same token, I am quite sure there is no royal road to good writing. But the writer who is willing to sweat for hours on end and to stomp and shout and start over again is finally going to get it right. I take heart that effort is finally rewarded and that over time we can actually learn how to do this. Alexander Pope said, “True ease in writing comes from art, not chance, as those move easiest who have learned to dance.”⁴ I do think we can learn to dance with words, and when a prose tango here or a poetic foxtrot there really clicks, it is worth all that effort and more.

My second piece of counsel about tackling a blank page comes from Frank Smith in his “Myths of Writing.” He said encouragingly: “Thoughts are created in the act of writing. [It is a myth that] you must have something to say in order to write. Reality: You often need to write in order to have anything to say. Thought comes with writing, and writing may never come if it is postponed until we are satisfied that we have something to say. . . .” The

assertion of write first, see what you had to say later applies to all manifestations of written language, to letters . . . as well as to diaries and journals.”⁵

So, again take heart. Begin and learn as you go. You will have ideas and phrases come late that could not have come early. Elder Bruce R. McConkie said he learned the gospel by teaching it. Maybe we find what it is we want to say by writing and writing until finally it appears.

Lastly, even though we all ought to be modest in assessing the importance of what we write, we should never underestimate the significance of a powerful idea or a prescient expression however plain the writer. On June 20, 1942, Anne Frank wrote: “I haven’t written for a few days, because I wanted first of all to think about my diary. It’s an odd idea for someone like me to keep a diary; not only because I have never done so before, but because it seems to me that neither I—nor for that matter anyone else—will be interested in the unbosomings of a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl. Still, what does that matter? I want to write, but more than that, I want to bring out all kinds of things that lie buried deep in my heart.”⁶

I think we have all been grateful that a thirteen-year-old nobody whose scribblings would surely never be read by more than a half-dozen people in her own family (as she thought!) nevertheless felt to write anyway. Consider, too, the myriads of testimonies we have heard from our own heroes and heroines who had the will to write. One of my favorites has been this from Elizabeth Horrocks Jackson, who wrote of their crossing of the North Platte in the Martin handcart company of 1856:

Some of the men carried some of the women on their back or in their arms, but others of the women tied up their skirts and waded through, like the heroines that they were. . . . My husband (Aaron Jackson) attempted to ford the stream. He had only gone a short distance when he reached a sand bar in the river on which he sank down through weakness and exhaustion. My sister, Mary Horrocks Leavitt, waded through the water to his assistance. She raised him up to his feet. Shortly afterward, a man came along on horseback and conveyed him to the other side. . . . My sister then helped me to pull my cart with my three children and other matters on it. We had scarcely crossed the river when we were visited with a tremendous storm of snow, hail, sand, and fierce winds. . . .

About nine o’clock I retired. Bedding had become very scarce, so I did not disrobe. I slept until, as it appeared to me, about midnight. I was extremely cold. The weather was bitter. I listened to hear if my husband breathed—he lay so still. I could not hear him. I became alarmed. I put my hand on his body, when to my horror I discovered that my worst fears were confirmed. My husband was dead. . . . I called for help to the other inmates of the tent. They could render me no aid; and there was no alternative but to remain alone by the side of the corpse till morning. . . .

Oh, how those dreary hours drew their tedious length along. When daylight came, some of the male part of the company prepared the body for burial. And oh, such a burial and funeral service. They did not remove his clothing—he had but little. They wrapped him in a blanket and placed him in a pile with thirteen others who had died, and then covered him up in the snow. The ground was frozen so hard that they could not dig a grave. He was left there to sleep in peace until the trump of the Lord shall sound, and the dead in Christ shall awake and come forth in the morning of the first resurrection. We shall then again unite our hearts and lives, and eternity will furnish us with life forever more.

I will not attempt to describe my feelings at finding myself thus left a widow with three children, under such excruciating circumstances. I cannot do it. But I believe the Recording Angel has inscribed in the archives above, and that my suffering for the Gospel's sake will be sanctified unto me for my good.⁷

I don't know who taught young Elizabeth Horrocks to write, or whether anyone taught her to write, but there is an elegance and beauty in her prose that makes us feel the chill of the Wyoming wind as we read it. My faith is bolstered because she wrote of such difficult days.

One other very personal piece I have loved over the years is this letter from Joseph F. Smith, writing on the death of his firstborn child, Mercy Josephine Smith, June 6, 1870, two months shy of the child's third birthday:

I scarcely dare to trust myself to write, even now my heart aches, and my mind is all chaos; if I should murmur, may God forgive me, my soul has been and is tried with poignant grief, my heart is bruised and wrenched almost asunder. I am desolate, my home seems desolate and almost dreary . . . my own sweet Dodo is gone! I can scarcely believe it and my heart asks, can it be? I look in vain, I listen, no sound, I wander through the rooms, all are vacant, lonely, desolate, deserted. I look down the garden walk, peer around the house, look here and there for a glimpse of a little golden, sunny head and rosy cheeks, but no, alas, no pattering little footsteps. No beaming little black eyes sparkling with love for papa; no sweet little enquiring voice asking a thousand questions, and telling pretty little things, prattling merrily, no soft little dimpled hands clasping me around the neck, no sweet rosy lips returning in childish innocence my fond embrace and kisses, but a vacant little chair. Her little toys are concealed, her clothes put by, and only the one desolate thought forcing its crushing leaden weight upon my heart—she is not here, she is gone! But will she not come back? She cannot leave me long, where is she? I am almost wild, and O God only knows how much I loved my girl, and she the light and joy of my heart.⁸

No comment on that view into a father's heart is necessary or appropriate.

When he wrote his magnificent dictionary, which became the early gold standard for dictionaries in the English language, Samuel Johnson wrote, "The chief glory of every people arises from its authors."⁹ I think it's fair to say

that part of our “chief glory” in this Church is those of you who write so well and repeatedly demonstrate the power of the written word.

May I close with two of my favorite New England writers? Henry David Thoreau said: “A written word is the choicest of relics. It is something at once more intimate with us and more universal than any other work of art. It is the work of art nearest to life itself. It may be translated into every language, and not only be read but actually breathed from all human lips;—not be represented on canvas or in marble only, but be carved out of the breath of life itself.”¹⁰

And Emily Dickinson, the belle of Amherst, wrote:

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.
I say it just
Begins to live
That day.¹¹

God bless you to unleash the power of the written word in promulgating the gospel of Jesus Christ, the greatest cause a writer could ever have in this world, I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. **RE**

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Notes

1. *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 72–73, 7:3.
2. Samuel Johnson, *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, Volume 2, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (London: Oxford, 1897), 309.
3. Stanley Gudder, *A Mathematical Journey* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), xv.
4. Alexander Pope, “Sound and Sense,” in *Poetry X*, <http://poetry.poetryx.com/poems/1917>.
5. Frank Smith, “Myths of Writing,” *Language Arts* 58, no. 7 (1981): 793, 795, as quoted in Brad Wilcox, “Why Write It?” *Ensign*, September 1999, 57.
6. Anne Frank, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (1952), 2, as quoted in Wilcox, “Why Write It?,” 57.
7. Elizabeth Horrocks Jackson, autobiographical sketch, 3–4, n.d., Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
8. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *The Life of Joseph F. Smith: Sixth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1938), 455–56.
9. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, vol. 1 (London: n.p., 1755), preface.
10. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1910), 86.
11. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960).