

“The Nobility of Failure”

R. LANIER BRITSCH

At the outset I want to make one thing clear. I love competition, and I like winning more than losing. My friends with whom I play racquetball know that I hate to miss a single shot (even though I miss many), much less lose a game or series. I am a quietly competitive kind of guy. But I have been perplexed by the idea that is current in our time and among many members of the Church that “winning is everything.” I believe that in an ultimate sense, the eternal sense, this is true. But along the path, as we work our way toward our eternal salvation, is winning, is success, is making more money, is acquiring more things, is knowing more, is having the highest degrees, is holding the very top position, is being assistant to the mission president, is having more baptisms while serving as a missionary really what life is all about? My talk today centers on the worth of serving well and doing our best and then allowing the Lord to count the value of our sacrifice.

In the early 1960s, shortly after I married my wife, JoAnn, an important experience happened in our family. My older brother, Todd, was selected as a member of the BYU College Bowl team to participate on national television. He was made captain of the four-person team, something our family considered a wonderful

distinction. I’m not sure how BYU people of earlier eras would rank that event, but many of us considered the four-win, one-loss run of our team to be one of the most important happenings in the intellectual history of BYU. We thought it put BYU on the map as a school of better than solid academic distinction.

Yet when the team flew into the airport and was greeted by a large and enthusiastic crowd, I remember Todd saying something like, “Why are you all here? We lost.” Within a few days Elder Harold B. Lee gave a devotional address and mentioned not only the team’s wins but also its final loss. I can’t remember the exact words, but his message was that sometimes we learn more from defeat than from victory.

I have thought many times about Elder Lee’s brief message. Life did not end with the defeat that Sunday afternoon. For the members of the team, it was actually just getting started. I don’t know what happened to two of the four team members, but I’ve watched my brother’s career as a faculty member and administrator here at BYU with interest and family pride. His

R. Lanier Britsch was a BYU professor of history when this devotional address was given on 29 June 1999.

good friend from the team, David Stone, has recently been called into the Second Quorum of the Seventy. No, life did not end with that single loss.

In our extremely competitive world, we sometimes have the impression ground into us that if we are not number one, we are not anyone at all. The national champions are remembered with fame and glory whereas whomever ended in second place is forgotten or, in the eyes of some rabid fans, tossed into the dustheaps of history.

I have borrowed the title of my talk today from a book by the historian of Japan, Ivan Morris. It is titled *The Nobility of Failure*. In his introduction Professor Morris wrote:

*Our red-toothed, red-clawed world, attuned to the struggle for survival and dominance, reveres success, and its typical heroes are men and women whose cause has triumphed. Their victory is never without travail, and often its price is the hero's life. Yet, whether he survives to bask in the glory of his achievements . . . or proudly dies . . . , the effort and sacrifice will, in the most pragmatic sense, have been worthwhile. [Ivan Morris, *The Nobility of Failure: Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1975), p. xxi]*

Today I have chosen to share some thoughts on the worth of not being number one. Or, better said, I wish to emphasize that what appears to be failure is sometimes the greatest success. Only time and eternity reveal the greater truth.

I was impressed with part of Salt Lake Olympic Committee president Mitt Romney's message to the graduates of the Marriott School of Management this past April. Contrary to the kind of advice that is sometimes given to graduates—saying that if they will work hard they will surely succeed and grow rich—he forthrightly stated that even though we may work hard, keep the rules, cross every *t*, and eat everything on our plates, we might not be big successes in life. A good deal depends on fate

or luck or circumstance. Sometimes the good guys do not win—or so it appears. He said his own father, Governor George Romney, following his defeat in his attempt to gain the Republican Party's nomination for the presidency, had this reaction: "I aspired, and though I achieved not, I was satisfied."

I have also been impressed with the post-presidency years of President Jimmy Carter, a man who has done much for our nation and the world. Defeat is not the end for truly good men and women.

Today I will share with you in brief form the story of 17 men who served the Church in a cause they considered a failure. The cause was the mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to India, Burma, and Siam (Thailand) between 1851 and 1856. I first became aware of this great chapter in Church history when I wrote about it in my master's thesis. Recently, with many more sources and resources, I have rewritten the story of the mission: *Nothing More Heroic: The Compelling Story of the First LDS Missionaries in India* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1999).

Last summer my wife and I, in company with Shahram and Sarah Paksima—wonderful BYU students who served as our guides and helpers—traveled to India to retrace the footsteps of those early missionaries. Our goal was to visit as many of the cities and cantonments, villages, shrines, temples, and roads where missionaries of the Church's East India Mission served in the 1850s as was possible. We started our travels in Bombay. This was appropriate because Hugh Findlay, one of the first two full-time missionaries in India, served there and in Pune, 80 miles distant, for several years, most of it alone. We could have begun our trip in Calcutta, where the first converts to the Church were made, but our plans worked better from Bombay.

Wherever we went we looked for the imprint of their steps. Not much remained after almost 150 years, but most of the

cantonments—military bases or camps—were still in place. We were surprised that they were so large—more like towns than camps. Our missionaries visited cantonments wherever they went in India. Unfortunately, because of military and government policies regarding preaching on cantonment, they were largely rejected and unable to have influence among the European military personnel. But I believe I'm getting a bit ahead of myself. I need to tell you at least the main parts of the story.

In 1849 two young Latter-day Saint sailors, George Barber and Benjamin Richey, neither of whom held the priesthood, sailed from Liverpool, England, to Calcutta, India. Because their ship needed repairs, it was put in dry dock, and they spent some time at a home for sailors. There they met a scripture reader named Maurice White. Their conversations with him regarding their newfound faith led them into company with a group called the Plymouth Brethren. The young sailors taught the restored gospel to their new friends, and soon several of them were converted. But because they held no priesthood authority, Barber and Richey had to leave their converts unbaptized when their ship sailed from Calcutta.

Some months later, written requests for living witnesses arrived in Liverpool from Calcutta. Church leaders decided to ask Joseph Richards, a Church member who was an elder, to visit with the Plymouth Brethren on his next trip to Calcutta. He was a sailmaker on the merchant ship *Gloriosa*. In June 1851, Richards met the Church's friends in Calcutta and baptized four of them—James Patrick Meik; his wife, Mary Ann; Matthew McCune; and Maurice White. Richards ordained White an elder and called him as president of the Wanderers Branch. These new members were the first to be baptized as Latter-day Saints in all of Asia. The Wanderers Branch was the first Church unit in Asia. Richards remained in

Calcutta for only two weeks and then returned with his ship to England.

Based on this small success, Elder Lorenzo Snow, who was president of the Church's missionary work in Italy, Switzerland, and Malta, decided to include India in his jurisdiction. He sent Englishman William Willis to Calcutta and Scotsman Hugh Findlay to Bombay. Willis arrived in Calcutta on Christmas Day of 1851. Findlay arrived in Bombay by March or April 1852.

Initially, Elder Willis had wonderful success. He was greeted well and warmly by six members of the Church. White, the branch president, had left for England, but James Patrick Meik and Matthew McCune had taken up the work and had baptized several others. Meik was constructing a small meetinghouse in the heart of Calcutta. Elder Willis was pleased when representatives of various groups of Indians sought him out and exhibited interest in his message. Before long his ministry took him 20 miles or so beyond Calcutta in several directions. He regularly wrote to Church leaders in Liverpool regarding his successes. In January 1852 he wrote that he was "bounding with grateful emotions" that he had been called to preach the gospel in India ("Letter from Elder William Willis: The Gospel in Calcutta" *Millennial Star* 14 [15 March 1852]: 91). He began baptizing groups of Indians—all former Christians, mostly Baptists. Four months later, in May 1852, he reported a Church membership of 189. Most of these were native farmers. There were about 19 Caucasians among the group.

Willis' seeming success and positive reports to England led Elder Snow to carry a positive recommendation to the leading Brethren in Salt Lake City that the East India Mission should be enlarged. On August 28–29, 1852, the Church held a special conference in Salt Lake City. The First Presidency called 108 missionaries to many states and nations. Nine elders were called to India and four were called to Siam (Thailand). They left Salt Lake City in late October and

traveled south to San Bernardino by wagon train in a group of almost 40 missionaries. At San Bernardino they sold their wagons and stock and sent their money back home. Then it was on to San Pedro, where they found a small ship to carry them to San Francisco. After several weeks of unsuccessful fund-raising there, the elders were blessed to receive a large contribution from a California member named John M. Horner. They could now continue on to India. They sailed through the Golden Gate on January 28, 1853, and 86 days later arrived at Calcutta. Captain Zenos Winsor and his clipper ship, the *Monsoon*, had been wonderful hosts.

But on arriving in India the elders faced disappointing news. Elders Willis and Joseph Richards (who had returned to India as a full-time missionary in the summer of 1852), had left Calcutta to preach the gospel at various cities and cantonments up the Ganges basin. By April 1853 they were in the vicinity of Delhi. Furthermore, almost all of the native Indian members in and around Calcutta had already fallen away. There was also an apostasy among the European Saints. Only six or eight members remained of an expected 200.

The problem among the Indians related to their expectation to be paid to be members of the Church. The issue was complicated. Time will allow only a brief explanation. Indian converts were outcast when they joined any Christian church. They lost their place in society. They had no former social relationships, no occupation, no means of financial support, no place to live, and no community political rights or power. When they became Christians, they in effect became part of a Christian quasi-caste. Their occupation was now to be Christians, with all that implied. To be Christian was now their work. Conceivably, if asked what they did for a living, they might have answered, “I am a Christian.” I’m stretching this just a little bit, but I want to make a point. When they went from denomination to denomination or from mission to mission seeking higher compensa-

tion, they were doing a somewhat reasonable thing within the context of their own experience and circumstances. They wanted the best pay they could get for doing their new caste occupation—being Christian. But this reality did not help the disappointed hearts of the missionaries. They considered these people to be hypocritical apostates and developed a great distrust for Indians.

Among the European members of the Church there was another problem—polygamy. At the same special conference at which the elders received their calls, the Church had made public its doctrine and practice of plural marriage. Word of this announcement arrived in Calcutta via the mail steamer three weeks before the elders arrived there. Polygamy was the shout heard round the world. The new members in Calcutta were deeply troubled by the doctrine, and some apostatized. But that was just the beginning. Nearly everywhere they went throughout the subcontinent, the elders were persecuted and rejected for their beliefs.

But there was nothing to do but go on. Soon after they arrived, Mission President Nathaniel V. Jones assigned the other eight India elders to places around the country. Two were assigned to go up the Ganges (they eventually traveled over a thousand miles to Delhi and beyond), three were sent to Madras, two were asked to go a few miles north to Chinsura (until they heard from Elder Findlay in Bombay), and Jones and a companion remained in Calcutta. Elder Chauncey W. West, who presided over the four Siam-bound elders, having learned that the way was hedged up to travel overland to Siam (a war was raging in Burma), made the decision to try to teach the gospel in Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka) and then move on to Siam when it was possible. He and Elder Benjamin F. Dewey went briefly to Ceylon and then on to Bombay, where Elder Hugh Findlay was laboring. They stayed there a few months and then sailed home around the south side of Sumatra,

through the straits between that island and Java, around the east side of Borneo, through the South China Sea to Hong Kong, and then finally back to San Francisco.

One of the Siam elders, Elam Luddington, made it to Bangkok briefly but was persecuted by Christians and Buddhists and finally fled after 127 days in the country. His voyages home were frightening and life-threatening. The fourth Siam elder was Levi Savage, Jr. He spent most of his mission alone in Burma, where he learned to speak and write Burmese. On the way home from his mission, he joined with the Willie Handcart Company. It was Savage who warned that group not to go on because of the lateness of the date. Nevertheless, he went forward with that ill-fated company of emigrant pioneers and did his best to alleviate the suffering when it came.

Ultimately, the India elders visited most of the important cities on the subcontinent. They were not totally without success. They baptized well over 100 converts, 20 or so of whom emigrated to Zion. But they also saw a number of their converts weaken, wane, and wash away with the waves of criticism and persecution.

One of the most difficult problems for the elders was the news of missionary success from Britain and Denmark. In both places thousands of people were joining the Church and moving on to Utah to be with the Saints. The India missionaries discussed among themselves and also in their letters to the British Church periodical the *Millennial Star* their sense of failure when compared with the truly fruitful fields. They did their best to explain that matters in India were not like those in England. They occasionally complained in their journals and wished for a better place to teach the gospel.

Frankly, while traveling in India last year, I found it difficult. There are many, many people, and conditions leave much to be desired. I remember picking our way along the jam-packed, overworked sidewalk in downtown

Calcutta. I found myself wondering how anyone survives with so much heat, so many buses and trucks belching black exhaust, so many people, so many taxis, so much humidity, so little sidewalk. How can anyone stand the constant pressure of hawkers and the pull at one's trousers of beggars clamoring for baksheesh? Getting across the street was like swimming perpendicular to a massive school of enormous, fuming fish. Looking upstream or down at the traffic was almost like watching a complex water ballet of vehicles weaving in and out. How can people drive such streets? How can anyone get anything done? Did our early missionaries really walk these very streets? I asked myself. No, the streets they walked have been gone a long time. But they walked and worked in this very place and many other places much like it. The early elders did not fight exhaust fumes or as many people in the streets, but the heat and humidity were almost unbearable. Poverty was ever present. Transportation was tediously slow and difficult. And diseases common to tropical climates—malaria, cholera, dysentery, and others—were a problem.

We traveled from place to place last summer in sturdy air-conditioned trains. When we rode through the countryside following the routes of the elders, we went in comfortable, air-conditioned automobiles. And when we retired for the night, we slept in clean hotel rooms after eating clean, tasty food. My heart goes out to our early missionaries who traveled so far on foot or by bullock cart. Many nights they slept on the ground under trees or in abandoned sheds, not knowing what kinds of varmints and poisonous snakes might share their rustic rest but trusting in Almighty God that he would spare their lives another night.

Among Europeans in India our missionaries seem to have been the only ones who walked and carried their own bags and belongings. Others felt it was beneath their station to stoop to such labor. Villagers found them odd

and often stared at them as they plodded through their dusty or muddy paths. Lacking fresh water, our elders sometimes drank from wells, but usually drank from tanks, simple reservoirs used by the natives to catch monsoon rainwater. By the end of the year these reservoirs were rank and unsavory.

At times the temperatures were so high that sunstroke was almost unavoidable. Most Englishmen in India at that time would not leave their bungalows between 10 o'clock in the morning and the cool of evening. But the elders usually had no place to hide from the sun. One of the elders, William Carter, suffered so miserably in the heat that President Jones sent him home after only a couple months in the country. President Jones said Carter "was too far advanced in years and had been through too many hardships to stand the climate of India" (William F. Carter, "Incidents from the Journal of William F. Carter," in Kate B. Carter, comp., *Heart Throbs of the West* [Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1943], 4:17). This action probably preserved the life of the elderly Elder Carter. He was 42 at the time.

To summarize, the elders faced a number of problems. The single greatest deterrent to their success was the then-accepted doctrine of plural marriage. A second great problem was the refusal of the cantonment commanders to allow the elders to preach in those areas. Closely associated with this problem was the wholesale rejection of the elders by most of the Europeans throughout the country. They were an arrogant and haughty group who considered themselves above the elders and most other men. There was much corruption and immorality among the European civil servants and soldiers.

But was everything dark and evil? Were there no good people to assist the elders? Actually there were some wonderful people, native Indians and Europeans, who came to their aid and made their lives bearable and at times satisfying. In almost every city a few

generous individuals provided places to sleep, rooms in which to preach, and food to eat.

Others even paid for the publication of tracts, handbills, and pamphlets. Elder Skelton wrote that the only times he went hungry were the times when he didn't want to ask for food. The Lord always provided if Elder Skelton would ask. And in each major place—Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, Poona, Karachi, and Hyderabad—converts to the restored gospel gave freely of their personal resources to support the Lord's purposes. Perhaps the kindest people as a group were the captains of ships and river steamers. By count, the India and Siam elders sailed on at least 49 oceangoing sailing ships and river steamers. In a number of instances the captains took them gratis or at greatly reduced fares. Six of the elders sailed around the world without purse or scrip.

In closing, what can be said of the East India and Siam missions of 1851 to 1856? Relatively few converts were made. Certainly the missions did not change India or Siam. One of the important facts is that all 17 elders lived through the experience. This may sound trivial today, but I doubt if we could find another group of European men of similar age who went to India from England and America at that time who did not lose up to half of their number in a similar time period. Diseases and debauchery took many lives. Our elders suffered miserably with malaria, dysentery, and fevers of diverse kinds, but they were blessed to survive and return home to their loved ones. In addition to the problems related to health were those connected with travel. Various of the elders experienced harrowing times at sea. But they returned home safely.

Probably the most important observation we can make in historical retrospect is that the mission strengthened the missionaries' testimonies. They accepted the call from the Lord and did their best to establish the restored gospel in the mission field. As I have reviewed these men's journals and other writings, I have

not found a single complaint or question regarding the wisdom of Elder Lorenzo Snow or President Brigham Young in sending them to India. The elders were obedient. They trusted in the Lord and in their leaders. Among these elders several announced publicly upon their arrival in Utah that they were ready to accept any future assignments from their priesthood leaders. For example, Elder Chauncey Walker West wrote:

*I feel grateful to my Father in Heaven that my life has been spared to mingle again with the saints in these peaceful valleys, and I now report myself on hand for duty whenever the servants of God call, for the Priesthood is my law. ["The India Mission: Letter No. 5," *Deseret News* 5, no. 36 (14 November 1855): 286]*

I should mention that these men were Church members with considerable experience. Most were married. The average age was 32. Richard Ballantyne had already founded the Sunday Schools of the Church before his call to India. Three of them had been in the Mormon Battalion. Others had fought in the Battle of Nauvoo in 1846. And still others had helped construct the Nauvoo Temple. One was among the first group of pioneers to enter the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. All of them died in the faith, and most of them lived long lives and produced a great posterity.

Another point is that even though convert baptisms were few, about 20 members emigrated to Utah to be part of the commanded gathering. The descendants of the Meiks, McCunes, Booths, Hefferans, Taits, Davies, and others who came to Zion are grateful for the missionary service rendered to their ancestors in India.

Finally, the Church was obedient to the Lord's commandment to take the gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. It was not easy to go to places like India, Burma, Ceylon,

and Siam. But the Lord had commanded it. Did it matter if the elders did not have great success? Not really. The Lord was trying his Church and his people. To some the mere fact of going may not seem that important, but it was. In his dedicatory prayer of the Hong Kong Temple in May 1996, President Gordon B. Hinckley noted the faithfulness of the three elders who served in that unsuccessful mission at the same time the elders were in India. He prayed:

*We are grateful for the faith of those who, nearly a century and a half ago, first came to Hong Kong as missionaries of Thy Church. Their labors were difficult and largely without reward. But their coming was an evidence of the outreach of our people to all nations of the earth, in harmony with the commandment of Thy Beloved Son that the gospel should be preached to every nation, kindred, tongue and people. ["Hong Kong Temple: 'May Thy Watch Care Be Over It' " (dedicatory prayer), *Church News*, 1 June 1996, p. 4]*

In a similar way we can honor the elders who served in India. They did not succeed impressively, but they went and they served and they remained faithful.

Observers of the martyred Joseph Smith might have found his life a failure if they had seen his limp and lifeless body on the ground at Carthage Jail. And many who looked on the Savior as he hung dying on the cross might have considered his mission a failure as well. But time has shown the apparent temporary failure of Joseph Smith to be but the prelude to the glorious growth of the Lord's work. And the Savior's apparent failure at Calvary was in actuality the greatest conquest in all eternity, the conquest over sin and death. That we may learn to distinguish between what appears to be success and what is success in eternal terms is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.