

President Wilford Woodruff and Thoughts for Youth

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Today is the ninety-seventh anniversary of the birth of Elder LeGrand Richards, who left us on Tuesday, 11 January of this year. His passing has reminded thoughtful people of the life of President Wilford Woodruff, fourth president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Many of us here tonight have touched the hand or heard the voice of Elder Richards. He in turn heard the voice and touched the hand of President Woodruff who was an associate of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Someday you may be able to tell your grandchildren you once heard the voice of LeGrand Richards, who knew men who had known and lived with the Prophet. Thus the generations of mankind touch each other. Accordingly, I have been impressed tonight to share with you some things which President Woodruff has left for us to contemplate. Let me review a few matters with you.

The Life of Wilford Woodruff

Wilford Woodruff was born in Farmington, Hartford County, Connecticut, 1 March 1807. He learned the trade of a miller. He worked as a miller in a number of communities in his native state. He first learned of Joseph Smith through a newspaper article in the spring of 1832. He was twenty-five. Some nineteen or twenty months later he met Elders Zera

Pulsipher and Elijah Cheney in Rushland, New York, where he had moved and was farming. On 31 December 1833 he was baptized by Zera Pulsipher. Four months later he first met Joseph Smith in the streets of Kirtland, Ohio. I would like to read to you about his first meeting with the Prophet Joseph Smith. He recorded,

Before I saw Joseph I said I did not care how old he was, or how young he was; I did not care how he looked—whether his hair was long or short; the man that advanced that revelation was a prophet of God. I knew it for myself. I first met Joseph Smith in the streets of Kirtland. He had on an old hat, and a pistol in his hand. Said he, “Brother Woodruff, I’ve been out shooting at a mark, and I wanted to see if I could hit anything.” And, said he, “Have you any objection to it?”

“Not at all,” said I. “There is no law against a man shooting at a mark, that I know of.”

He invited me to his house. He had a wolf skin, which he wanted me to help him to tan; he wanted it to sit on while driving his wagon team. Now, many

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*might have said, "You are a pretty prophet; shooting a pistol and tanning a wolf skin." Well, we tanned it, and used it while making a journey of a thousand miles. This was my first acquaintance with the Prophet Joseph. And from that day until the present, with all the apostasies that we have had, and with all the difficulties and afflictions we have been called to pass through, I never saw a moment when I had any doubt with regard to this work. [G. Homer Durham, comp., *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946), pp. 29–30. All subsequent quotations from Wilford Woodruff, although they appeared elsewhere originally, were taken from this book.]*

Wilford made his home with the Prophet for about a week. On Sunday, Joseph called a priesthood meeting. They gathered in a little cabin: Joseph and Hyrum Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Parley and Orson Pratt, and William E. McLellin. Young Woodruff heard them all bear testimony. Joseph spoke last and said: "Brethren, I am very much edified and interested in listening to your testimony. But I want to tell you that you know no more concerning . . . this work . . . than a parcel of little children." Then he told them (in the words of Wilford Woodruff) that "this work would fill the whole earth, and that all nations would have to hear the proclamation of the gospel" (p. 30).

A few days later on May 1 Wilford Woodruff left Kirtland with the vanguard of Zion's Camp, marching to Missouri. As a priest he served his first mission in Arkansas and Tennessee, being ordained an elder during that time on 4 April 1835. On 21 April 1836, while on that mission, he learned from David W. Patten of the Twelve that he had been called to membership in the Second Quorum of the Seventy. Returning to Kirtland later that year, he was called to the First Quorum of the Seventy on 20 December 1836. Then came a second mission to the eastern states and the

Fox Islands in the summer of 1837. He was called to membership in the Quorum of the Twelve 8 July 1838. Learning of the call on August 9, he returned west to Illinois 19 December 1838. Proceeding on westward to Missouri, he was ordained to the apostleship by Brigham Young at the temple site in Far West, Missouri, 26 April 1839.

His next mission was to England. He went to Preston, Lancashire, in the spring of 1840. Then, inspired to go south, he went to the home of John Benbow, in Ledbury, Herefordshire. There he baptized nearly 600 people in the spring of 1840. On 8 February 1841, together with Heber C. Kimball, he secured the British copyright to the Book of Mormon at Stationer's Hall in London. Then he returned to the United States with Brigham Young and other members of the Twelve, arriving in New York, and reached Nauvoo by 5 October 1841.

His subsequent service as a builder of the American West and as president of the Church deserves study by every young man and young woman. He plowed the first acres when the pioneers arrived, where the Centre Theater in Salt Lake City now stands at First South and State Streets. Although he presided over the Church as President of the Twelve following the death of President John Taylor in July 1887, he was not sustained as President of the Church until 7 April 1889. He left instructions that, upon his death and that of his successors, the First Presidency should be reorganized without delay. Elder LeGrand Richards, as a boy of seven, saw him and attended one of the sessions of the dedication of the Salt Lake Temple in April 1893. President Woodruff died 2 September 1898 in San Francisco, California, at the age of 91, a tremendous leader and a tremendous life!

Laying a Foundation

From his rich experience and with that background, I would like to call to your

attention some concepts that I believe will be of help to you as university students and as future leaders.

Said he in 1857, speaking to young people:

You are now laying a foundation in the bloom and the beauty of youth and in the morning of your days to step forth upon the stage of life to act a conspicuous part in the midst of the most important dispensation and generation in which man has ever lived. And I can say in truth and safety that the result of your future lives, the influence which you will exert among man, and finally your eternal destiny for time and eternity will in a great measure depend upon the foundation which you lay in the days of your youth, the manner in which you store your mind and cultivate it while young. [pp. 265–66]

I commend to you your opportunities as university students. Store your mind with useful knowledge and cultivate it. Take advantage of the facilities afforded you by your university. During my undergraduate days and also as a graduate student, I found it very profitable, about once a month, to circulate throughout the periodical room in the university library. I would sample the journals in the various fields, from accountancy to zoology. I was curious to know what people were thinking and saying in fields other than my own. Some things were more easily understood than others, but the effort was worthwhile. Occasionally I would come across an article that I would examine more closely, sometimes reading the entire thing. Another practice I found extremely useful was to gain a stack permit as soon as I was eligible for one. It permitted me access to the inner resources of the university library. Unfortunately, it did not come until I was a graduate student. But I took advantage of it and again would spend a few minutes every so often browsing through fields not my own major. As an undergraduate, I early discovered that the main reading room was well stocked with all sorts of reference works.

Furthermore, the card catalog gave me access to the entire resources of the library. I majored in history and political science, studying, among other things, a great deal of European history. Having always been a bookworm, I was interested in literature. The university requirements did not permit me to take the course in literature I would have liked. So I read by myself. During those undergraduate years, particularly the junior and senior years, I read a great many historical novels, chief among them being those of Alexandre Dumas, with their picturization of events in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France and England.

The Privilege of Reading

How does one learn? Let us call upon the wisdom of President Wilford Woodruff. Said he on one occasion:

There is one thing I wish particularly to impress upon your minds, and that is, the importance of improving your time while young in treasuring up knowledge and learning those things which will be useful to you in after life. I know from experience, and so do most parents, that the child cannot appreciate the worth of true intelligence, the importance of improving their time in storing up useful knowledge while they are young, as they will when they come to act upon the stage of life . . . and feel the full force of the responsibilities of training up children. . . . Do not be discouraged because you cannot learn all at once; learn one thing at a time, learn it well, and treasure it up, then learn another truth and treasure that up, and in a few years you will have a great store of useful knowledge which will not only be a great blessing to yourselves and your children but to your fellow men. [p. 269]

Today, in the age of television and video discs, it is easy to spend a great deal of time watching and listening. Carefully selected, such experiences can add much to your learning. But, please do not neglect the privilege of

reading. One can absorb many more words, ideas, and pages in a half hour of reading than are available in the usual television program. I was inspired some years ago by an intimate acquaintanceship with a member of the Council of the Twelve who, as a matter of course, would read as many as two hundred books in a year: Church books, scientific books, general information, and other useful literary materials. Parenthetically I can say I know it because it was Sister Durham's father, Elder John A. Widtsoe of the Council of the Twelve. He had an enormous capacity for absorbing knowledge. He did it by using his time wisely.

A Blessing to Families

On one occasion President Woodruff said:

I have felt for a long time, and I think I have realized to some extent that the duties resting upon us are very great, and we ought to strive to improve in wisdom and knowledge and in the principles of government, in order that we may know how to be fathers [and] mothers . . . and learn how to be counselors and how to preside, not only in our own family circles, but wherever we may be called to act. [pp. 270–71]

He was vigorous in expressing his views as to how young people may bless family life. The family, of course, is the most important unit of society and of the Church. Said he:

Obey your parents in all things and comfort their hearts, for you have the power to do this. When they are weary and pressed with the cares of life, seek to ease their burdens and smile upon them in their hours of sorrow and you will cast a charm of joy and peace around them which they cannot obtain from any other source. [p. 267]

Further:

Be kind to your brothers and sisters and all with whom you associate; kind words and good manners

will cost you nothing and will add greatly to the happiness of those around you. [p. 267]

Today in the world and in our immediate circles, we see too much of anything but kind words and good manners. Can we not promote them in our own conduct, including choice of language, tone of voice, courtesy at all times? Further, President Woodruff counseled:

Be happy, be contented, enjoy the days of your youth, enjoy our peaceful homes, enjoy the society of your parents, brothers and sisters, while you have an opportunity, for the days of your youth will soon be gone. Manhood [and womanhood] will be upon you with all of its attendant cares and responsibilities. [p. 267]

Revelation for Men and Women

Wilford Woodruff believed sincerely in the reality of revelation; that God lived, that Jesus Christ, his Son, was the great Revelator through his prophets and by means of the Holy Spirit. As President of the Church in October 1892, he declared:

One subject more I want to name, and that is with regard to our future. I will tell you what the Lord has revealed to me. You talk of revelation. I have had a good many revelations. We are not particularly required to write all the revelations given to us. Joseph Smith wrote revelations in his day, and we have them to read. . . . There has been a good deal said about the rising generation of the [Latter-day] Saints. I will tell you what will come to pass.

My sons, the sons of my counselors, the sons of these apostles, and the sons of this people will rise up by the power of God and they will take this kingdom and bear it off. You need make no mistake about this matter. They are the element that God has ordained, the same as He ordained us, to do His work. Our posterity will not forsake the Lord, nor their fathers, nor their mothers, nor the work in which they are engaged. Too many of them, it is true, have been led astray; too many of them have

been found where they should not be; but the bulk of the sons of this people will remain true and faithful to this work. [pp. 272–73]

In using the language he did, referring to “sons” and the future, I am certain he would not exclude the young women, the daughters. For, on another occasion he made clear his belief:

It is the privilege of every man and woman in this kingdom to enjoy the spirit of prophecy, which is the Spirit of God; and to the faithful it reveals such things as are necessary for their comfort and consolation, and to guide them in their daily duties. [p. 61]

As president of the Church in October 1892 he said, speaking about revelation:

These mountains contain thousands upon thousands of devoted women, holy women, righteous women, virtuous women, who are filled with the inspiration of the Almighty God. Yes, these women have brought forth an army of sons and daughters in these mountains, by the power of God, and these sons and daughters partake of the inspiration of their mothers, as well as of their fathers. . . . Yes, we have revelation. The Church of God could not live twenty-four hours without revelation. [p. 61]

Grow in the Gospel

I commend to you the lives of our great leaders. I commend to you the lives of great

men and women in all generations. From them we can learn much. We can proceed to the next phase of life if we know more of the minutes of the previous meeting, if I can use that expression. Longfellow’s words in the “Psalm of Life” may have aggravated the critics for mixing his metaphors, and so forth, but the truth remains that:

*Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footsteps on the sands of time.*

May you take advantage of your years at this university, may you take advantage of all its opportunities of which you are capable. May you couple them with increased growth in faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, whose splendid life must be the model for us all. As to his divine nature, character, and sacrifice for our sakes, I testify. I further testify that, as the gospel has gone now “from Greenland’s icy mountains” to “India’s coral strand” (no. 40, *Hymns*), as we sang tonight, you will live to see it extend even farther in your day and generation because it is the work of the Redeemer of the world, the Lord Jesus Christ, and I so testify in the sacred name of Jesus Christ. Amen.