Foreword

J. H. Adamson

If you wish to know the oak-rooted values of any ruler, read his letters to his sons. Brigham Young was, for a time, the ruler of a vast territory and a small people who had no intention of remaining small, who were determined that Utah would some day be known for more than its landscape. Utah was to be the heart of the Kingdom, and its people would first embody and then represent to the world the virtues of that kingdom.

Brigham was not overtly dynastic; perhaps he had too many sons for that. Never does he say to one of his boys, If you please your father, you may inherit a kingdom someday. Perhaps he was too wise in the annals of history, knowing that Ulysses is usually followed by Telemachus, that kingdom builders beget sons who may inherit their features but not their effectiveness.

But if Brigham’s boys had ears to hear, their father’s letters carried always one eloquent plea: here is what I have lived by. This is what formed my character. This is what you must live by if you would succeed me, succeed me as a man that is, for whether they should succeed him as a leader could wait. That was God’s decision.

As a boy Brigham received almost no formal schooling. Perhaps he was exaggerating a bit, but he always said that he had no schooling until he “got into Mormonism,” and if so he was then thirty-one years of age. What had he learned before that time? He had the privilege of picking up brush, chopping down trees, rolling logs, and working amongst the roots, and of getting shins, feet, and toes bruised. I learned to make bread, wash dishes, milk the cows and make butter.

Those are about all the advantages I gained in my youth.

One senses the wry humor, the confident self-deprecation of the man who is assured of his status, but also there is that continual defensiveness in his writings and speeches: “I have not the advantage of language. However I rise to do the best I can.”

Not the advantage of languages. Brigham must have been remembering the time back in Kirtland, Ohio, when Brother Joseph
had sought out a Hebrew with a storied name, Joshua Seixas, and asked him to teach the sacred language to the School of the Prophets. Joseph himself, a very apt student, was soon reading aloud to the pleasure and delight of his teacher; but the stocky carpenter with the big shoulders could never puzzle out those exotic words, and the English Bible that he loved became more alien, more strange and forbidding with every lesson. Soon Joseph, perceiving Brigham's distaste for book learning, suggested that he paint the temple and take care of the other things that the more ethereal natures seemed to have no time for.

The early Mormon pioneers had an almost sacred thirst for education. The First Presidency at this time was no exception: Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Jedediah Grant each had a kinsman, son or brother, on a mission in England at the same time, and each was enormously proud that his relative had received an education, that the family was "improving." Each of these men was always self-conscious about his own lack of formal training. Brigham once said,

\[ \ldots \text{when I began to speak in public, I was about as destitute of language as a man could well be.} \ldots \text{How I have had the headache, when I had ideas to lay before the people, and not words to express them; but I was so gritty that I always tried my best.} \]

But Heber C. Kimball, speaking for all three fathers, said it best. Writing to his son William, he nostalgically recalled the time when he had been called by the Prophet Joseph to open the door of proclamation to England, the Church's first overseas mission.

I did not at that time have the education that you have, neither did I know and understand one tenth part of what you did previous to your going on your mission. I was illiterate and unlearned, weak and feeble, and felt as though I was the weakest of all. Many times I thought to myself, why should I, so weak an instrument, be called to such an important work, while there were many who were learned and could speak with all the eloquence of artificial education.

As the frontiersman pondered this paradox, why a man with hard hands should have been chosen by the Lord when there were clerks available who knew how to spell, how to keep the tenses straight, and
how to sprinkle their speech with the devices of rhetoric, Heber found an answer. It was the same answer his friends Brigham and Jedediah had also found. A man who can do none of the clerkish things feels weak, uncertain, confused, vulnerable to satiric attack, to the condescension of other men who write and speak with an acquired grace. In this wavering state, the man for whom the beginning has always been a deed rather than a word can only fall back on his God, can only ask the Holy Ghost to speak through him and for him. Ten words from such a man are worth more than ten thousand words from those who pride themselves on their learning and who have a "pretty language." Prettiness does not go far in this world; truth does. Give truth her ten words; say those words for her, and then be silent. Allow the mouth more than ten words and the muscles relax, the resolution wavers, the voice goes on talking, tickling, brushing the ear like a feather while the guts of the enterprise turn to water.

Brigham and Heber had both known the pain of traveling backward in time to England where their people had come from, to England where men spoke the speech of Shakespeare. And among those sophisticates of the word they had felt smaller than a bean, smaller than a pea. So what could they do? They would avoid the university towns or the fashionable resorts; they would not seek out the sleek women or the smiling men. They would go rather to some place where they had to travel thirty miles out and thirty miles back and say their ten words. Never mind the shoe leather; that was the shoemaker's worry. Let the humble men find the humble place and begin to preach. "Out there" people would gather around who would find their scrambled tenses and provincial pronunciations natural and familiar; out there, thirty miles from anywhere, Brigham could write "all things are going pertiwell," and no one would smile for they wrote that way too. Out there, whether in England or America, he could write of the greatest tragedy he had ever known,

It has ben a time of morning the day that Joseph and Hyram ware braught from Cartheg to Nauvoo. It was Judged by meny boath in and out of the church that there was more then 5 barels of tears shed. I cannot bare to think enny thing a bout it

and such a letter would bring more tears to those who read it.

And so in England Brigham had gone to the cities and villages to
tell the people about the Kingdom. Salvation after death was well enough, he would disturb no beliefs about that, but here and now there was a new and holy land, an empty land waiting for its people. Brigham spoke about that land, sketching a bright dream full of hope for women who, with their babies, were huddled in the blight of millions, for men in villages whose lives were forever mortgaged to the landlord. These were the people whom an untaught missionary could touch and melt and send walking, sailing, river-boating to Zion. Zion where the devil wants to kick and make a fuss but the Saints won’t let him. Out in Zion, says Brigham, the Saints are happy; it is the devil who has the blues. Remember that, boys: in Zion the Saints are happy. Some of them were people who had called happiness a lie, who had given up on life, who never knew health for sickness, who thought more about death than life, who couldn’t taste any sweetness because the sour was always on their tongues. But they were happy now in Zion where the devil had the blues.

But unschooled men have their blind spots, just as clerks do. Brigham’s mistrust of the men of words, his perception of the limitation of clerks, sometimes led him into strange positions. For example, he mistrusted both the writers and readers of novels. That was odd in a way, for he loved the theater. When he could actually see the characters move, hear them talking, discover the springs of their action and feel their own emotions rising in himself, he unself-consciously laughed or wept and became for a time the very character he saw portrayed. But when he read fiction, when all he had before him was the cold page, it all seemed false, strained, completely unlike the vicissitudes of real life that any man would learn about soon enough. Reading was good, Brigham thought, only if it was useful. Sell your Dickens, he counsels one son, and buy Stephens and Catherwood’s Travels in Central America, a piece of literary advice not even his most ardent disciple would subscribe to now. Read about the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, says Brigham to his sons; peruse the lives of good men in all ages; learn of art and science and manufacture: all of these will fit you for future usefulness. But novels, minute descriptions of the heart, of the tender passions, of all that silly business between men and women that began with Adam and has never ended, it is all a butterfly world, my boys. Sell your Jane Austen and buy a set of surveyor’s tools, your Thackeray and buy a mule and a plow, your Defoe and Smollett and purchase a medicine kit, a
shoemaker’s awl, a package of sugar beet seeds, a ram, and a serviceable ewe, anything, anything that is useful.

So we accept that. The unschooled man, the man who has no pretty words must have his small revenges on the clerks. But that same man cannot stay out there, thirty miles from anywhere, saying his ten words and baptizing his hundred converts. The same spirit that drove him into that wilderness will surely drive him back to the heartland, the Kingdom where he will practice the virtues and qualities he wishes to pass on to his sons.

And so those values Brigham lived by began to emerge as themes in his letters to the boys. The first theme that no reader can miss is his constant exhortation to observe, observe, observe. On the day when he wrote that first heartsick letter to his daughter after he had heard of the murder of Joseph and Hyrum, after he himself had shed some of that five barrels of tears, he nevertheless, even in his grief, noted that the river was high, the crops were good, and wheat was selling for forty cents a bushel. As the years passed, his interest in these elementary things never waned: he always reported to his sons the price of wheat, the condition of City Creek or the Jordan River, the heat of the sun, the extent of the rains or even the wind, which, one January, blew "as fiercely as ever I felt it in this valley." One year the grasshoppers ruined the crops in Morgan, Summit, and Wasatch counties but the observant Brigham knew that there was wheat in Davis and Cache. So, with "prudence and economy," two of his watchwords, the Saints would manage; everyone would eat. There would need to be forceful leadership, no time for paperwork or bureaucratic shifts. Grain would have to be moved, farmers mollified and paid something, the fearful reassured. Because he always observed and therefore knew so intimately the state of his kingdom, Brigham could provide.

Nor was it enough to observe crops and climate; rather, the most difficult thing to observe and assess, said Brigham, was man himself. To his son on a mission in England he said what he could continue to say all his life: to combat the world, we must know the ways of the world, and one could know them only by observation, continual alertness, never allowing the slightest thing to escape notice. "Listen attentively," he wrote to his son, "and observe minutely the manners, customs, and remarks of all, for, from the most humble of our fellow creatures, an observing man can learn something that will be useful to him in after life." Such, said Brigham, had been his own "daily and
hourly” practice all his life, and he had reaped enormous benefits from it. And when he traveled around the kingdom, while others were talking, he was observing: Are the people industrious? Are they happy? Are they at peace with themselves and one another? Those were the important things for a leader to observe.

Another of Brigham’s themes emerges in the letters whenever he sends money to his sons, for inevitably there is a cautionary word about economy, frugality, parsimony. The old New England watchword of “eat it up, wear it out, make it do” was part of the texture of Brigham’s thought. Money was the product of work, and the principal work of his time was the gathering of the poor. Every cent “luxuriously expended” was money wasted that might have brought the poor to Zion. He urged his sons to observe the poor carefully, for then they would see how people managed to live on nearly nothing, and the boys might well emulate such prudence and economy. Yet Brigham was never stinty. Always he left a door open for the boys to obtain money; there was always some agent or friend or business associate to whom they could apply whenever “necessity and judgment” dictated. Brigham knew that money had its limitations. The Lord, he said, could work without money, but the devil could not, and anyone bent on acquiring money, an indifferent thing in itself, should always remember that.

Occasionally we get a glimpse of Brigham smarting under the monstrous image of himself that he saw reflected in the world outside his own kingdom. When his son Willard was admitted to West Point, the New York Herald inquired editorially if the cadets would “permit the outrage.” Only a man in public life can know how he hurts when his enemies strike at his children. So what should Willard do? There was only one thing to do, his father said. Be proud of who he was; live at West Point as he would at home, frugally, prayerfully, chastely (yes, the polygamist demanded chastity from his sons; as a young man he had been chaste; they could be and must be also). Above all Willard must eschew self-righteousness or defensive umbrage. To all his classmates he should be kind, courteous, but firm in his own ways. If Willard’s life exhibited his principles, he would soon be “at the head and not at the tail.” And surely enough when Brigham received, as all fathers did in those days, a report from the inspector at West Point showing Willard to be first in his class in mathematics and fourth in French, Brigham writes, “We were very
much gratified to hear of your success, especially in Mathematics.”
First place Brigham respected; fourth place he never thought much
about one way or the other.

When another son went to the Naval Academy, it seemed to be
less of a national outrage, but Brigham nevertheless instructed the boy
to be always gentlemanly, courteous, and forbearing. Brigham spoke
much to all of his children about courtesy, a trait he loved in anyone.
Along with courtesy, he continually asked his children to cultivate
honor and integrity. For Brigham, integrity meant that the mouth and
the heart were one; and while much nonsense had been spoken about
honor, it basically meant that other men trusted you.

Although Brigham was a practical man, he developed a mys-
tique or two, and one of these was the mystique of work. In the King-
dom of God, said Brigham, “an idler shall have no place.” And what
everyone should work hardest at was self-improvement: he never tired
of saying, improve, improve, improve. He writes a daughter that
she should study continually and that she might also “learn the
Pianist.” To two of his sons in the East he suggests that instead of
coming home for the holidays they might stay where they were and
learn to play the piano and the organ. The son who wishes to learn the
piano will find good enough teachers where he is; but learning the
organ is another matter. Boston is the place for that, and Brigham has
already inquired about the best teachers in that city, which was half
a world away. He proudly tells his children that now in Zion there is
a Mutual Improvement Association in which all the young people can
work to improve themselves. From Brigham there flows a stream of
constant exhortation to the children to study, to read, to learn an art
or a skill. There is little spare time in the world Brigham has known,
and so leisure is the most precious thing the children will have if they
will use it for self-improvement. Try to learn, he tells one of his sons;
try to improve, even though things at the moment are very difficult
for you, and then he adds, “I glory in your grit.”

The ethic of work was never more fully endorsed than by Brig-
ham in a letter to his West Point son:

Whoever wastes his life in idleness, either because he
need not work in order to live, or because he will not live
to work, will be a wretched creature, and at the close of a
listless existence will regret the loss of precious gifts and the
neglect of great opportunities. Our daily toil, however
humble it may be, is our daily duty, and by doing it well we make it a part of our daily worship.

In the same month he wrote to his son at the Naval Academy:

You will find that much of the happiness of this life consists in having something worthy to do and in doing it well. . . . If a man have to drive the plow let him do it well; if only to cut bolts, make good ones; if to blow the bellows, keep the iron hot. It is our attention to our daily duties that makes us men. . . .

And so at last Brigham had found the words he had long been seeking: a man's essential nature is defined by his works, not his words. Let the clerks think about that.

Brigham is sure of one thing all his life: he will never hide from the world; he would rather meet it on its own terms and win. His boys will go to eastern colleges, will travel round the world, will serve missions in far-off places where Zion is only a long memory. When the railroad came and the gentiles said that at last the world would assimilate Brigham, he roared with laughter. God had sent the railroad to make easier that way in the wilderness by which the poor should come to Zion. The telegraph? A marvelous invention for a man with a kingdom. Now conception and execution could be twin-born from the same mind as they never could in the day of horses. A steam engine? It produced even more energy than Brigham himself, and so he felt positively companionable toward it. He would surely like to have one.

And yet one cannot help wondering if Brigham, in the pride of his strength, was not sometimes overconfident. It is not for nothing that so many holy men in all ages and cliques have forsaken the world, seeking solitude and isolation. The question arises whether Willard, at West Point, should not perhaps marry an eastern girl who could help further his military career. That is something of a shock for Brigham but he recovers nicely. If it must be so, Willard should marry one of the daughters of General Sherman. If one is forced to jump, he should jump into the king row. And then Feramorz is reading novels and apparently giving insufficient attention to the Bible. Too, a disaffected wife, incited, Brigham says, by greedy lawyers, is suing for alimony and support. Some of his children who are away from home wish to attend the services of other churches. Certainly. Go ahead. Get all the truth you can, but you will never find anything like the Kingdom.
And yet in all this hearty acquiescence, one feels somewhere a note of reserve, a tone of misliking. The world is moving in and each year Brigham has a little less strength to resist it. Less bodily strength perhaps, but no diminution of the will. And then there are the children who must beat the world on its own terms after he is gone, and so he tells them over and over again that they must improve themselves “in the sphere of usefulness”; they must think and write clearly because clarity makes language not more beautiful but more useful; the children must be temperate in pleasures and moderate in expenses, always remembering that there is no excellence without labor, no success in this world without honor and integrity. But the world is proving a little more stubborn than Brigham had thought, the Kingdom a little more difficult of attainment.

The Kingdom. That was the ultimate mystique for this practical man. He never ceased thinking about it; he never stopped working for it. Sometimes he seemed not to remember where God’s kingdom began and Brigham’s ended. Once when he was bone tired, he had asked a clerk to write a note to his son in England. That note was filled with scribal formularies:

With much pleasure at the request of your honored father, I embrace a few moments to give you the current items of news of this part of our mountain land.

Promising to endeavor to keep you informed of such items of interest as would be interesting to you, from time to time, as I may be directed, I have the pleasure to subscribe myself.

As his last act of that long day, probably around midnight, Brigham picked up that letter, read those cold formulas and phrases that had come from the mind without consulting the heart, and forgetting his own marginal literacy that made all his scribes necessary, he seized the pen and wrote to the son he loved:

My Dear Son Joseph

It is now late at nigh. The male has arived this evening and I have heard your letter red, and it rejoice my hart to here sush good knews frm you. May the Lord Bles you for ever and ever, is my Prayr for you. . . . You can hardly emagen the joy it gives me to here such good knew from you. My sole leaps for joye. Be faithful my son and the Lord will Bles you and I Bles you. Remember you are my
oldest son, the arc of the famely, I want you to be faithful
that you may [be] wortho of your stashon in my Kingdom.

My Kingdom? Did he mean in my Father's kingdom where there
are many mansions, or did he mean in Brigham's kingdom where
there was one keystone in the arch, the eldest son? It was late and
Brigham was wearier than he realized. Who can know what he
meant?

God's kingdom. Such a strange place really, so indicative of the
man and his time. A place where everyone works, both men and
women, where children continually improve themselves, where every
new wonder of technology is harnessed for the poor, where all men
strive to be their own best, where above all else men cherish and
love their children who alone can make the bright dream come true.

Brigham thinks even more about the children now, for he is
troubled with rheumatism; he suffers from fierce stomach pains, and
the harassment of the lawyers is more painful than it was. He wearsies
of seeing his name slain, his children hurt, his intentions misunder-
stood. Sometimes these days Brigham has the blues. But then he re-
members the Kingdom—the homes without tears, a land of peace
where the wheat heads out every year under the August sun, where
the rains come just before the streams go dry. Honor and integrity,
courtesy, alertness, curiosity, striving, striving, wonderment and
work and the glory of the Kingdom to give it all meaning. Those are
the things, said Brigham to his boys, that you must learn from me.
When a man's sons know these things he can die without bitterness;
when a man's sons know these things he can sleep peacefully in the
valley, lying in the shadow of the Kingdom. When a man says these
things to his sons, says them from the heart and the bone and the
mind, how can his letters be other than beautiful and strong? And
that is what these letters are.

Sleep well, Brother Brigham. You left more sons and daughters
than the children of your flesh. They hear you now. They understand.