

Lessons from Three Apostles: A Biographer's Perspective

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Brothers and sisters, being helped to this podium reminds me of a recent rebroadcast devotional talk by Elder LeGrand Richards. He, too, was helped to this stand. He tilted his head, smiled, raised his voice, and launched a whirlwind of missionary stories. And the students loved him!

It is about LeGrand, David B. Haight, and Boyd K. Packer that I will speak—the three for whom it has been my privilege to write.

In turn, each entrusted me with his life's story and his innermost thoughts and feelings. Elder Richards once said that I knew more about him than he knew about himself. From a biographer's perspective, this was true. Beyond his perception, I saw him through the eyes of his Brethren, business friends, family, and the press. I saw his boyhood and later homes. And I walked the streets of his missions in Holland and in New Bedford, Massachusetts.

The same coverage was given to each of the three.

Through their eyes I saw them as boys. Each was raised in a household of faith within a large family. And each seemed marked for early destruction, as if to thwart the Father's plan for him.

LeGrand's head was crushed twice, his arm broken, and his body bruised by an enraged ram, and then a bone disease left him in pain and limping for life.

Young David's spirit was dealt a cruel blow when his father—his ideal—died suddenly while his son was at play. Many accidents wounded him physically as well.

At age five, Boyd was stricken with polio. In pain, he struggled to walk again. But there was more—he felt fear apart from his sickness, and terrible nightmares followed.

Through their tellings, I experienced that defining time when each received a sure witness and consecrated his life to the Lord.

LeGrand was fourteen when he heard two returned missionaries bear testimony in his ward.

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The Lord touched his heart with such power that, returning home, he knelt beside his bed and asked God to help him live worthy to be a missionary when old enough to go.

When the time came, he was on crutches and in pain. At Church headquarters he was told to go home until well. He said, “You book me and I’ll be ready!”

His father blessed him and he went—ailing in body, strong in spirit, but yet having to battle the Dutch language.

David Haight’s hour came during World War II, when as a lieutenant commander in the Naval Reserve, he served under Admiral Nimitz, with headquarters at Pearl Harbor, and Admiral Crosse on the mainland.

With the war escalating in the Pacific, Commander Haight left San Francisco at midnight for a high-level conference in Hawaii. He was assigned a sleeping bag in the tail of a Boeing Clipper.

As he lay awake that night, his whole life passed before him. He had a testimony and was a counselor to his bishop, but his priorities were not right. He poured out his heart in prayer and promised that if he lived through the war and was permitted to return to his family, the Lord’s work would always come first.

As a young bomber pilot, Lieutenant Packer’s long months of scripture study and prayer gave him a belief that what he read was true—but he needed to know!

Counter to the inner peace he sought was the hell of war around him. From a rise above a rocky shore on Ie Shima Island near Okinawa, he viewed parts of human bodies floating in the shallow waters below. He saw a slaughtered mother and her infant lying near their gutted cottage. A love and compassion for the innocent and poor of the earth enveloped him—but also for the billions of the dead.

Soon after, a hurricane hit the island with such velocity that it leveled buildings and wrecked ships. One night following this event, Boyd struggled with doubt and uncertainty. He needed a sure witness.

He arose and walked some distance to enter a makeshift bunker—there to kneel and really ask.

Almost mid-sentence it happened. He knew, for it was given him to know.

Through my own eyes I saw the three as examples of gospel truths.

Soon after beginning LeGrand’s project, we met in his office each Friday morning. He answered all of my questions. At age ninety-four, his recall was remarkable. I was never intimidated by him. Then why, upon returning home, was I so exhausted that I went to bed?

After several weeks I came to know that it was the Light! The veil was very thin, and LeGrand lived so close to the Lord that His Light shone through His great servant.

Service, then, drew him to the Master and made possible the renewal spoken of in the last verse of Isaiah 40, which he loved:

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.
[Isaiah 40:31]

LeGrand taught me that long after the body loses its strength and mobility, the spirit can yet run, walk, and even soar.

Although David Haight achieved in the military, in business, and in the community, he remained humble. He pokes fun at himself delightfully. His humility and humor make him a loved speaker for young and old.

His humility also brings him close to the Lord. I can tell this experience because he expanded upon it in general conference in 1989 (see David B. Haight, “The Sacrament—and the Sacrifice,” *Ensign*, November 1989). I had interviewed him at his office, gathered my notes, and had my hand on the door to leave. Suddenly he stood and with a faraway look described the details of the Lord’s Last Supper as if he were there. When he finished, I slipped out, thinking, “I have heard an apostle of the Lord speak as in vision.”

President Packer is a constant and devoted friend. I witnessed the father-son relationship between the venerable Elder Richards and the young apostle, whom LeGrand called his “guardian angel.” As he helped him to an assignment or meeting, Boyd

loved him, learned from him, and was obedient to his wishes.

One day we were in LeGrand's office when he gave the young apostle an assignment that went against his grain. Elder Packer gave a logical argument against it. But when LeGrand smiled and said, "Now, Boyd, if I were your daddy . . .," mid-sentence Boyd said, "I will do it!" Obedience is President Packer's second name and the key to his many gifts.

During the countless hours that I spent with these three men, I came not only to know them but to know for myself who they really are.

Thus I can testify that the fifteen men who lead this Church have been called, sustained, and anointed witnesses of the Lord Jesus Christ to all the world. They are men of varying backgrounds, abilities, and temperaments. Their individual stories are unique to themselves. But in some ways they are alike. Each has been trained, tested, and tempered over many years. Each has consecrated his life to the greatest cause on earth and in heaven—the work of the Master. Each is obedient to the Father's will. Despite sickness, infirmity, exhaustion, trouble, or opposition, they simply bear the weight of their priesthood authority, administer the affairs of the kingdom, and carry the "good news" to the world. For them there is no retirement here or hereafter, only a mission transfer to a vastly enlarged field of labor, still under the direction of the Master who directs them here.

I can also testify that when an apostle is called, his companion is called as well—to share as full partner, of equal importance and responsibility in her distinctive role and with equal duration of service in time and eternity.

My family and I have received much from this school that we love. In return, I offer a gift for you graduates! It consists of ten words given me by the Spirit at a time of great need. They are childlike in simplicity but profound in application: Work in place of worry! Faith in place of fear!

Those words sustained me through each book I have written. And they must again sustain me if I am to complete my last biography, because I am eighty-seven and only on chapter three.

And so I repeat: Work in place of worry. Faith in place of fear. And I leave you with my congratulations and my testimony. I know that the Father lives, that He loves us and wants us to come home. I know that Jesus is the Christ, the Light and the Life of the world, that through His obedience and His sacrifice He has all power to save and to exalt His Father's children. I know that the Holy Ghost lives, that He is the Comforter and the Revelator and that it is His still, small voice that we must listen to and obey. I know that the Restoration scriptures, paid for so dearly by the Prophet Joseph Smith and his family, are verily true. I know that this knowledge surpasses all other knowing. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.