

Your Refined Heavenly Home

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Half a century ago Elder Adam S. Bennion of the Quorum of the Twelve was the assigned speaker at this devotional. His address was preceded by a stirring passage from *Cavalleria Rusticana* by Mascagni, performed by one of the university's fine choral groups. Elder Bennion was so touched that he began his message with these words: "I will shorten my remarks today so that this musical masterpiece may be performed for us a second time at the close of this assembly."

The nearer we get to God, the more easily our spirits are touched by refined and beautiful things. If we could part the veil and observe our heavenly home, we would be impressed with the cultivated minds and hearts of those who so happily live there. I imagine that our heavenly parents are exquisitely refined. In this great gospel of emulation, one of the purposes of our earthly probation is to become like them in every conceivable way so that we may be comfortable in the presence of heavenly parentage and, in the language of Enos, see their faces "with pleasure."¹

Brigham Young said: "We are trying to be the image of those who live in heaven; we are trying to pattern after them, to look like them, to walk and talk like them."² To prepare us to do this, the 13th article of faith encourages: "If

there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things."³ Refinement is a companion to developed spirituality. Refinement and spirituality are two strings drawn by the same bow.

Today I would like to peek behind the veil that temporarily separates us from our heavenly home and paint a word picture of the virtuous, lovely, and refined circumstances that exist there. I will speak of the language, literature, music, and art of heaven, as well as the immaculate appearance of heavenly beings, for I believe that in heaven we will find each of these in pure and perfected form.

God speaks all languages, and He speaks them properly. He is restrained and modest of speech. When God described the grand creational process of this earth, He said in measured tones that "it was good."⁴ We would be disappointed if God had to use "awesome" or other exaggerated phrases in every paragraph.

Britain's Ben Jonson said: "Language most shows a man: Speak, that I may see thee."⁵ Our language reveals our thoughts, our virtues, our

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insecurities, our doubts, even the homes from which we come. We will feel more comfortable in Heavenly Father's presence if we have developed proper habits of speech. We not only wish to see God's face "with pleasure," we want to open our mouths with confidence that our speech harmonizes with the refinement of heaven.

We will thrill to hear exalted beings express their sublime thoughts in perfectly chosen words. I suppose that the language of heaven, properly spoken, may approach a form of music. Did C. S. Lewis have this in mind when he wrote: "Isn't it funny the way some combinations of words can give you—almost apart from their meaning—a thrill like music?"⁶ At Jesus' birth the angels appeared and spoke, not sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."⁷ We now try to capture that beauty in song, but the original angelic utterance was in spoken words, which thrilled like music.

Van Wyck Brooks, in his biography *The Life of Emerson*, told us that Ralph Waldo Emerson was invited to speak at the commemoration of the 300th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth. After proper introduction Emerson presented himself at the pulpit and then sat down. He had forgotten his notes. He preferred to say nothing rather than words not well measured. For some, it was Emerson in one of his most eloquent hours.⁸

A few years ago I overheard a Church leader lament the fact that he never had time for anything except to read the scriptures and other works of literature and to prepare talks. His wife admiringly responded, "I know, dear. We all know. We know every time you stand up to speak." As he spoke, listeners saw. The unremitting preparation through a lifetime of reading great literature naturally produced messages eloquent in both phrase and substance.

Refinement in speech is more than polished elocution. It results from purity of thought and sincerity of expression. A child's prayer on

occasion may reflect the language of heaven more nearly than a Shakespearean soliloquy.

Refinement in speech is reflected not only in our choice of words but also in the things we talk about. There are those who always speak of themselves, and they are either insecure or proud. There are those who always speak of others. They are usually very boring. There are those who speak of stirring ideas, compelling books, and inspiring doctrine. These are the few who make their mark in this world. The subjects discussed in heaven are not trifling or mundane. They are sublime beyond our most extended imagination. We will feel at home there if we are rehearsed on this earth in conversing about the refined and noble, clothing our expressions in well-measured words.

I grew up in a home in which the Sunday afternoon meal was an institution. We remained in our church attire. My parents almost always invited a special guest to join us at the dinner table. Several times it was the then president of this university. We were expected to remain at the table and converse about worthwhile things. In later years, as a student at this school, we attempted to do the same, often gathering in one of the Heritage Halls' kitchens on a Sabbath afternoon for a reverie of uplifting conversation.

Is there a generation today that needs to be superficially entertained? What is the prospect of a young man sitting in a dorm on Friday evening to read a great book and be thrilled by the music of the masters? Is Friday evening a frenetic flight to see where the entertainment and action will be? Could our society produce a Newton or a Mozart? Can 85 channels and uncountable DVDs ever fill our insatiable appetite to be entertained? Do any unwisely become addicted to computer games or Internet surfing, thereby missing the richer experiences of great reading, conversations, and music enjoyment?

One wrote: "We need the slower and more lasting stimulus of solitary reading as a relief

from the pressure on eye, ear and nerves of the torrent of information and entertainment pouring from ever-open electronic jaws."⁹ This solitary reading should evidence our spiritual and refined taste in selection of the reading materials.

Another said: "[Education] has produced a vast population able to read but unable to distinguish what is worth reading."¹⁰ This happy chapter of your lives at Brigham Young University will help you focus on reading materials of greatest worth.

I don't know whether our heavenly home has a television set or a DVD machine, but in my mind's imagery it surely has a grand piano and a magnificent library. There was a fine library in the home of President Hinckley's youth. It was not an ostentatious home, but the library contained about 1,000 volumes of the rich literature of the world, and President Hinckley spent his early years immersed in these books. When President Hinckley once came to my home, he spent time perusing the library. He observed the 50-volume collection of the Harvard Classics, commented that he has the same collection in his home, and said he had read much of it. To be well read, however, it is not necessary to possess expensive collections of literature, for they are available to rich and poor alike in the libraries of the world.

President David O. McKay was inclined to awaken at 4:00 a.m., skim read up to two books each day, and then commence his labors at 6:00 a.m. He could quote 1,000 poems from memory. We knew that whenever he stood at the pulpit. He referred to the grand masters of literature as the "minor prophets." He was a living embodiment of the scriptural admonition to "seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom."¹¹

My wife and I recently spent four years on Church assignment in Eastern Europe, residing in Moscow, Russia. We often traveled on the Moscow underground subway called the

Metro. We noticed the bowed heads of the Russian passengers, for they were reading Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, or Pushkin—and, sometimes, Mark Twain. The people were poor, but they were not obsessed with their poverty. They possessed the rich tradition of Russian literature, art, and music.

Elder James E. Talmage, before his call to the Twelve, was a mining geologist. He once spoke of the features of certain geology he had observed during a field trip more than a year before. He explained that he could not with certainty recall the terrain until after he developed a photograph he had made of the location. The photographic plate had been laid away in darkness for an extended time. It had only been exposed to the light for one-fiftieth of a second—but the image was indelibly impressed on the negative, awaiting a future date to reveal its message.¹²

The lesson does not escape us. The images to which our minds are exposed are held in store, seemingly forgotten, even for years. But at the crucial moment they re-present themselves to influence our thoughts and lives. And so it is with the music, literature, art, media, and other images to which we are exposed. The pamphlet *For the Strength of Youth* states: "Whatever you read, listen to, or look at has an effect on you. Therefore, choose only entertainment and media that uplift you."¹³

These are the words of President McKay:

As with companions so with books. We may choose those which will make us better, more intelligent, more appreciative of the good and the beautiful in the world, or we may choose the trashy, the vulgar, the obscene, which will make us feel as though we've been "wallowing in the mire."¹⁴

If we know the books located at the bedside, we know much about the man.

A good book, such as the scriptures, becomes a lifelong companion. A thoughtful man wrote:

*An unliterary man may be defined as one who reads books once only.*¹⁵

*I can't imagine a man really enjoying a book and reading it only once.*¹⁶

*Clearly one must read every good book at least once every ten years.*¹⁷

*The sure mark of an unliterary man is that he considers "I've read it already" to be a conclusive argument against reading a work. . . . Those who read great works, on the other hand, will read the same work ten, twenty or thirty times during the course of their life.*¹⁸

Of all the works worthy of repetitive reading, the scriptures stand paramount, for they are not founded in the opinions of men. Over the years I have oft remembered the counsel of the late Hugh Nibley: "If you pray for an angel to visit you, you know what he'll do if he comes. He'll just quote the scriptures to you—so you're wasting your time waiting for what we already have."¹⁹

Many years ago, while living in another part of the country, I became acquainted with a fine Latter-day Saint young man. He was a superior athlete, but he had never attended a cultural event. Living in the same community was a lovely young LDS sister. She spoke French as well as English. She played the violin. She presented herself as a refined daughter of God. One day the American Ballet Theatre came to our town. A group of us decided to attend, including this young man and young woman.

Now and then I glanced at the young man during the ballet. His eyes were riveted on the stage. Windows of new appreciation were opened. After the performance he approached me privately and said, in reference to the refined young sister, "Where have I been all of my life? This is what I want in my home. This is what I want as the mother of my children. Until now I thought only physical appearance

mattered." I gently reminded him that she would likely be drawn to one of refined nature, like herself, and it was time for him to look within.

Dear daughters of God, you are the crown jewels of all of His creations. There has never been a sunset, symphony, or work of art as lovely as you. May you catch the vision that you are destined to be a refined and regal queen, honored by an uncountable posterity, worlds without end.

If we could peek behind the heavenly veil we would likely be inspired by the music of heaven, perhaps more glorious than any music we have heard on this earth.

When some music has passed the tests of time and been cherished by the noble and refined, our failure to appreciate it is not an indictment of grand music. The omission is within. If a young person grows up on a steady diet of hamburgers and french fries, he is not likely to become a gourmet. But the fault is not with fine food. He just grew up on something less. Some have grown up on a steady diet of musical french fries.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell said:

*We . . . live in a world that is too prone to the tasteless, and we need to provide an opportunity to cultivate a taste for the finest music. And, likewise, we're in a world that's so attuned to the now that we need to permit people to be more attuned to the best music of all the ages.*²⁰

A few years ago I made my way to the bedroom of one of my sons to say good night. He was a junior in high school. As I approached his room, I heard the strains of Tchaikovsky's sixth symphony. I was surprised. I knew the boy loved sports, but I didn't know he loved Tchaikovsky. Months later, as my wife and I were listening to a videotape of three tenors singing, our son came in and sat down. He listened and saw, and a new appreciation developed. He said: "You never told me about

opera." He took the videotape to his room, and I never saw it again. Appreciation of the finest in music does not depend upon your age.

President J. Reuben Clark of the First Presidency, one of our greatest Christ scholars, used to listen to inspirational music in the evening before he began his insightful writings concerning the life of the Savior. The music opened his spiritual pores, as it does for all of us.

Recognizing the penetrating influence of great music, Oscar Wilde had one of his characters say: "After playing Chopin, I feel as if I had been weeping over sins that I had never committed, and mourning over tragedies that were not my own."²¹ After the first performance of *Messiah*, Handel said: "My lord, I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wish to make them better."²² Haydn "dressed in his best clothes to compose because he said he was going before his maker."²³

There are events of life so sublime that they cannot be imagined without the companionship of beautiful music. We could not have a Christmas without carols or a general conference without sacred anthems. And there could not be a heaven without music of surpassing beauty. Brigham Young said: "There is no music in hell, for all good music belongs to heaven."²⁴ It would be punishment enough to go to hell and not hear a note of music for all eternity.

This would be a good time to sift through your music library and choose primarily that which uplifts and inspires. It is part of the maturing process of your eternal journey. This would also be a fine time to learn a musical instrument or improve musical skills now partially possessed.

On the eve of his release, one of my fine missionaries during my tenure as a mission president spoke of a girl at home with whom he intended to renew association.

He inquired, "How will I know if she is the right one?"

I suggested, among other things, that he invite her to a cultural event. If she responded that this would be of no interest to her, then maybe he should pursue other alternatives. But if she had compelling spiritual qualities and could be enthralled by culture on Friday and love the athletic contest on Saturday, she might be the type of young lady he could choose as the mother for his children. It might be balanced and rewarding to be paired with her for eternity.

That which has been said about bringing great language, music, and literature into the home may be said with equal truth of great art—perhaps tastefully displayed in our heavenly home. It may also be said of our physical appearance and manners, as well as the order of the place in which we live, the way we offer our prayers, and the way we read God's word.

I once had opportunity to visit briefly with Audrey Hepburn, the great actress of days gone by, at the time she was making the movie *My Fair Lady*. She spoke of the opening scene in the movie in which she depicted a modest, unpolished flower girl. Her face had been besmirched with charcoal to make her seem part of her surroundings. "But," she said, with a twinkle in her eye, "I was wearing my Chanel perfume. Inside I still knew I was a lady." It doesn't take expensive perfume to make a lady, but it does require cleanliness, modesty, self-respect, and pride in one's appearance.

Many years ago an associate of mine decided he would please his wife by sharing with her a very specific compliment each night as he arrived home. One night he praised her cooking. A second night he thanked her for excellence in housekeeping. A third night he acknowledged her fine influence on the children. The fourth night, before he could speak, she said: "I know what you are doing. I thank you for it. But don't say any of those things. Just tell me you think I am beautiful."

She expressed an important need that she had. Women ought to be praised for all the

gifts they possess that so unselfishly add to the richness of our lives, including their attentiveness to their personal appearance. We must not “let ourselves go” and become so casual—even sloppy—in our appearance that we distance ourselves from the beauty heaven has given us. Every man has the right to be married to a woman who makes herself as beautiful as she can be and who looks in the mirror to tidy herself up before he comes home. Every woman has a right to be married to a man who keeps himself clean, physically as well as morally, and takes pride in his appearance. A husband should hurry home because of the angel who awaits him, and that angel should be watching the clock awaiting his arrival.

Occasionally a young man comes home from his mission and hastens to distance himself in appearance from everything associated with missionary service. He becomes slovenly. Heaven blushes. The young man who wants an exemplary spouse needs to look in the mirror and ask why she would want him. Then he should shave and press his clothes.

Years ago I attended a stake conference in California at which the wife of the stake president shared this story: She had been born considerably after the other children in the family, and her father was unusually protective of her. When a suitor would stop by to pick her up for a date, the father would look him over very carefully and then say: “Do you want to date my princess? Go home and wash your car and shine your shoes. Then I will give my permission.” I sometimes wonder if our Heavenly Father whispers the same when we date His precious daughters. The Book of Mormon speaks of a people who “did not wear costly apparel, yet they were neat and comely.”²⁵

There are those who flippantly say: “How I look has nothing to do with how God feels about me.” But it is possible for both earthly and heavenly parents to have unspoken disappointment in their offspring without

diminished love. I say it again: Sometimes heaven blushes but loves on.

President Joseph F. Smith, the sixth president of the Church, owned few things, but he took care of them. He was fastidious in his appearance. He pressed his dollar bills to remove the wrinkles. He allowed none but himself to pack his overnight bag. He knew where every article, nut, and bolt of the household was, and each had its place.

Would this be true of the environment in which you live? Is it a house of order? Need you dust, clean, and rearrange before you invite the Spirit of the Lord into your apartment? President Lorenzo Snow said: “The Lord does not intend that the Saints shall live always in dens and caves of the earth, but that they shall build fine houses. When the Lord comes he will not expect to meet a dirty people, but a people of refinement.”²⁶

David Starr Jordan, a former president of Stanford University, wrote:

*To be vulgar is to do that which is not the best of its kind. It is to do poor things in poor ways, and to be satisfied with that. . . . It is vulgar to wear dirty linen when one is not engaged in dirty work. It is vulgar to like poor music, to read weak books, to feed on sensational newspapers, . . . to find amusement in trashy novels, to enjoy vulgar theatres, to find pleasure in cheap jokes.*²⁷

I once heard a story about an imaginary king whose wife gave birth to a baby boy. The parents knew that the lad would someday inherit the kingdom. Desiring that their son be a wise king, fully familiar with the needs of the people over whom he would reign, the king and queen took the infant into the country to be raised as part of a peasant family. He was to be told nothing of his secret destiny until he became a man.

At the appropriate time the king and queen returned to the country to confer on their son the kingdom. They were greatly disappointed.

Having been told nothing of his appointed destiny, he was exactly that which life had prepared him to be. He understood the proper care of animals and the gathering of crops, but he knew nothing of armies and palaces and courtyards and presiding. He had lost his vision.

It should not be difficult for you to glean the truth in this story. Another King, your Father in Heaven, has sent you away from His presence to have experiences you would not have had in your heavenly home—all in preparation for the conferral of a kingdom. He doesn't want you to lose your vision. You are children of an exalted being. You are foreordained to preside as kings and queens. You will live in a home and environment of infinite refinement and beauty, as reflected in the language, literature, art, music, and order of heaven.

I close with the words of President Brigham Young: "Let us . . . show to the world that we have talent and taste, and prove to the heavens that our minds are set on beauty and true excellence, so that we can become worthy to enjoy the society of angels."²⁸ Even more, that we may enjoy the refined society of heavenly parentage, for we are of the race of the gods, being children of the Most High.

This is my testimony and my humble supplication for you, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Enos 1:27.
2. *JD* 9:170.
3. Articles of Faith 1:13.
4. Genesis 1:4.
5. Ben Jonson, *Timber; or, Discoveries Made upon Men and Matter* (1640).
6. C. S. Lewis, letter of 21 March 1916, paragraph 3, in *The Letters of C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves* (New York: Collier Books, 1986), 96.
7. Luke 2:14.
8. See Van Wyck Brooks, *The Life of Emerson* (New York: The Literary Guild, 1932), 297.
9. Storm Jameson, *Parthian Words* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 123.
10. George Macaulay Trevelyan, *English Social History: A Survey of Six Centuries, Chaucer to Queen Victoria* (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1942), 582.
11. D&C 88:118.
12. See James E. Talmage, "The Parable of the Photographic Plate: An Episode in Field Work," *Improvement Era*, April 1914, 503–505.
13. *For the Strength of Youth: Fulfilling Our Duty to God* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001), 17.
14. David O. McKay, *Pathways to Happiness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1957), 15.
15. C. S. Lewis, paragraph 24 of "On Stories," in *On Stories: and Other Essays on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 16.
16. C. S. Lewis, letter of February 1932, in *Letters to Greeves*, 439.
17. Lewis, letter of 17 August 1933, in *Letters to Greeves*, 458.
18. C. S. Lewis, chapter 1, paragraph 4, in *An Experiment in Criticism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 2.
19. Hugh Nibley, "Gifts," BYU lecture, 13 March 1979, in *Approaching Zion*, vol. 9 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book Company and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1989), 87.
20. Neal A. Maxwell, remarks at the inauguration of KRIC-FM, Ricks College, May 1984.
21. In Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," part 1 (1891).
22. In George Hogarth, *Musical History, Biography, and Criticism* (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1848), 67; see "A Tribute to Handel," *Improvement Era*, May 1929, 574.
23. Reid Nibley, in Hal Williams, "Dr. Reid Nibley on Acquiring a Taste for Classical Music," *BYU Today*, April 1980, 14.
24. *JD* 9:244.
25. Alma 1:27.

26. Lorenzo Snow, in Wilford Woodruff, *Fourth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints: History of His Life and Labors as Recorded in His Daily Journals*, prep. Matthias F. Cowley (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 468.

27. David Starr Jordan, *The Strength of Being Clean: A Study of the Quest for Unearned Happiness* (New York: H. M. Caldwell Co., 1900), 25.

28. *JD* 11:305.