

Experiences Worth Remembering

GORDON B. HINCKLEY

My dear friends, over the years I have spoken many times to generations of students who have assembled in this great Marriott Center. Today, if you will bear with me, I think I shall change the pattern of those previous addresses. Whether that change will be acceptable or not will depend on you. Furthermore, it is Halloween, and that calls for something a little different, though I don't know why it should.

As all of you recognize, I am now an old man who has weathered many seasons and been touched and affected by many experiences. Emerson was once asked what books he had read that had most influenced his life. He replied that he could no more remember the books he had read than the meals he had eaten, but they had made him.

And so, in the spirit of what Emerson said, rather than giving a speech I have thought to offer several brief cameos or vignettes or seemingly little experiences that I remember from out of the past and that have touched my life in an unforgettable manner. They have all been published, and some of you may be familiar with them. They will not be in chronological order.

I begin with number one.

I was in the city of Torreón, Mexico, and was being driven about in a beautiful and expensive automobile. It belonged to a man named David Casteñeda. At one time he and his wife and their children lived on a little rundown farm. They owned 30 chickens, two pigs, and one skinny horse. They walked in poverty.

Then one day two missionaries called on them. Sister Casteñeda said, "The elders took the blinders from our eyes and brought light into our lives. We knew nothing of Jesus Christ. We knew nothing of God until they came."

They moved into the little town of Bermejillo. Circumstances led them to the junk business. They bought wrecked automobiles. This led to association with insurance companies. They gradually built a prosperous business in which the father and his five sons worked. With simple faith they paid their tithing. They lived the gospel. They served wherever they were called. Four of their sons and three of their daughters filled missions.

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Through their influence some 200 of their family and friends have joined the Church. More than 30 sons and daughters of family and friends have served missions. They donated the land on which a chapel now stands. At the time I met them, the children—now grown to maturity—and the parents were taking turns going to Mexico City each month to work in the temple. They are a shining and inspirational example of the miraculous power of missionary work. Think of the wonderful consequences of their being taught and receiving the teachings of the gospel from two humble missionaries. Such miracles are occurring today all across the world.

Now, vignette number two.

I have stood at the tomb of Napoleon in Paris, at the tomb of Lenin in Moscow, and before the burial places of many others of the mighty leaders of the earth. In their time they commanded armies, they ruled with near omnipotence, and their very words brought terror into the hearts of people.

I have reverently walked through some of the great cemeteries of the world. I have reflected quietly and thoughtfully as I have stood in the military cemetery in Manila in the Philippines. There, laid out in perfect symmetry, are marble crosses marking the graves of 17,000 Americans who gave their lives in the Second World War. Encircling this burial ground are beautiful marble colonnades, where are remembered another 35,000 who died in the terrible battles of the Pacific and whose remains were never found.

I have walked with reverence through the British cemetery on the outskirts of Rangoon, Burma (now known as Myanmar), and noted the names of hundreds and thousands of young men who came from the villages, towns, and great cities of the British Isles and who gave their lives in hot and distant places. I have strolled through old cemeteries in Asia and Europe and yet other places, and I have reflected on the lives of those who were once

buoyant and happy, who were creative and distinguished, who gave much to the world in which they lived. They have all passed into the darkness of the grave.

All who have lived upon the earth before us are now gone. They have left all behind as they have stepped over the threshold of silent death. As I have visited these various cemeteries I have reflected, first, on the terrible cost of war. What a fruitless thing it so often is, and what a terrible price it exacts.

I have thought further of the oblivion of the grave. What would we do without the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Savior and our Redeemer? He has given us the assurance that life goes on beyond the veil, that it is purposeful and productive, and that each of us shall go on living after we depart this life.

Number three, the next item in my chronicle of significant events, is the great and deadly plague of the 14th century, followed by the Renaissance, and eventually followed by the Restoration of the gospel.

Following the death of the Savior the centuries rolled on. A cloud of darkness settled over the earth. Isaiah described it: "For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people" (Isaiah 60:2).

It was a season of plunder and suffering, marked by long and bloody conflict. Charlemagne was crowned emperor of the Romans in the year 800.

It was an age of hopelessness, a time of masters and serfs.

The first thousand years passed, and the second millennium dawned. Its earlier centuries were a continuation of the former. It was a time fraught with fear and suffering. In the 14th century the great plague began in Asia. It spread to Europe and on up to England. Everywhere it went there was sudden death. Boccaccio said of its victims, "At noon [they] dined with their relatives and friends, and at night [they] supped with their ancestors in the next world!" (Giovanni Boccaccio, *The*

Decameron, trans. Richard Aldington [1930 trans.; Garden City, New York: Garden City Books, 1949], 7).

The plague struck terror in the hearts of people. In five years it took the lives of 25 million—one-third the population of Europe. Periodically it reappeared, with its dark and ghoulish hand striking indiscriminately.

But this was also a season of growing enlightenment, the dawning of the Renaissance. As the years continued their relentless march, the sunlight of a new day began to break over the earth. There was a magnificent flowering of art, architecture, and literature.

Reformers worked to change the church—notably such men as Luther, Melancthon, Hus, Zwingli, and Tyndale. These were men of great courage, some of whom suffered cruel deaths because of their beliefs. Protestantism was born with its cry for reformation.

While this great ferment was stirring across the Christian world, political forces were also at work.

There came the American Revolutionary War, resulting in the birth of a nation whose constitution declared that government should not reach its grasping hand into matters of religion. A new day had dawned—a glorious day. Here there was no longer a state church. No one faith was favored above another.

All of the history of the past had pointed to this season. The centuries, with all of their suffering and all of their hope, had come and gone. The Almighty Judge of the nations, the Living God, determined that the times of which the prophets had spoken had arrived. Daniel had foreseen a stone that was cut out of the mountain without hands and that rolled forth and filled the whole earth (see Daniel 2:34–35).

Then occurred that most wonderful event, the revealing of the Father and the Son to the 14-year-old Joseph Smith. There followed in orderly procession the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the restoration of the

priesthood with keys to unlock the door of eternal life. How thankful we should be for these marvelous and wonderful things that so richly bless our lives, including the privilege of attending this university.

And now, number four is a cameo of a little different nature.

Joseph Anderson was a Seventy. He lived to be 102, the oldest General Authority ever.

He served as secretary to President Heber J. Grant, beginning way back in 1922. In his old age, President Grant became seriously ill. When Joseph visited with him, President Grant said, “Joseph, have I ever been unkind to you? Have I ever abused you in any way?”

Joseph said, “No, President Grant, you have never been unkind to me in all these many years.”

Tears rolled down President Grant’s cheeks, and he said, “Joseph, I am glad that you can say that I have never been unkind to you.”

President Grant died the next day. Joseph Anderson, through the remainder of his life, had reason to rejoice in the kindness, the civility, the decency, the honesty, and the integrity on the part of a most remarkable and wonderful man—President Heber J. Grant.

Number five is a touch on the lighter side. My father used to tell this story:

A boy came down to breakfast one morning and said to his father, “Dad, I was dreaming about you last night.”

“You were?”

“Yes.”

“What were you dreaming?”

“I was dreaming that I was climbing a ladder to heaven, and on each rung of the ladder as I went up, I had to write one of my sins.”

His father said, “Yes, where do I come into your dream?”

The boy said, “As I was going up, I met you coming down for more chalk.”

Now for number six:

I have always loved this piece of poetry by Rosemary and Stephen Benét. It is entitled

“Nancy Hanks” and speaks the thoughts of the mother of Abraham Lincoln. It reads as follows:

*If Nancy Hanks
Came back as a ghost,
Seeking news
Of what she loved most,
She’d ask first
“Where’s my son?
What’s happened to Abe?
What’s he done?”*

*“Poor little Abe,
Left all alone
Except for Tom,
Who’s a rolling stone;
He was only nine
The year I died.
I remember still
How hard he cried.*

*“Scraping along
In a little shack,
With hardly a shirt
To cover his back,
And a prairie wind
To blow him down,
Or pinching times
If he went to town.*

*“You wouldn’t know
About my son?
Did he grow tall?
Did he have fun?
Did he learn to read?
Did he get to town?
Do you know his name?
Did he get on?”*

[Rosemary and Stephen Vincent Benét, “Nancy Hanks,” in *A Book of Americans* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1933), 65]

You know the answer. He became America’s most-admired president.

Number seven:

No series of vignettes drawn from Church history would be complete without reference to the handcart pioneers of 1856—150 years ago at this very season.

My wife’s great-grandmother, Mary Penfold Goble, was baptized in England. The family joined the Hunt Wagon Company, which accompanied the Martin Handcart Company. Her daughter’s account is written in the simple, matter-of-fact manner of a young girl, but behind those plain words is stark tragedy. She wrote:

We traveled from 15 to 25 miles a day. . . .

We traveled on till we got to the Platte River. . . . We caught up with the handcart companies that day. We watched them cross the river. There were great lumps of ice floating down the river. It was bitter cold. The next morning there were fourteen dead. . . . We went back to camp and went to prayers. We sang the song “Come, Come, Ye Saints, No Toil Nor Labor Fear.” I wondered what made my mother cry. . . . The next morning my little sister was born. It was the 23rd of September. We named her Edith, and she lived six weeks and died. . . . [She was buried at the last crossing of the Sweetwater.]

When we arrived at Devil’s Gate it was bitter cold. . . . My brother James . . . was as well as he ever was when he went to bed. In the morning he was dead.

My feet were frozen [also my brother’s and sister’s]. It was nothing but snow. We could not drive the pegs . . . for our tents. . . .

. . . We did not know what would become of us. One night a man came to our camp and told us . . . [Brigham] Young had sent men and teams to help us. . . . We sang songs, some danced and some cried. . . .

. . . My mother . . . never got well. . . . She died between the Little and Big Mountains. . . . She was 43 years old. . . .

We arrived in Salt Lake City [at] nine o’clock at night the 11th of December 1856. Three out of [the]

four that were living were frozen. My mother was dead in the wagon. . . .

Early next morning . . . Brigham Young . . . came. . . . When he saw our condition—our feet frozen and our mother dead—tears rolled down his cheeks.

*The doctor amputated my toes . . . [while] the sisters were dressing mother [for her grave]. . . . That afternoon she was buried. [Life of Mary Ann Goble Pay, autobiographical sketch, typescript, LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City; also, "Mary Goble Pay Autobiography," in Arthur D. Coleman, comp., *Pay-Goble Pioneers of Nephi, Juab County, Utah* (Salt Lake City: n.p., 1968), 78–81; text modernized]*

What a story in a few brief words.

Number eight:

In 1966, while the Vietnam War was raging, I went to that land. When we landed at Tan Son Nhut Airport, Colonel Rosza put a piece of paper in front of me and said, "Sign this."

I said, "What is it?"

He said, "It's a release relieving the United States government of any responsibility for you while you are in Vietnam."

I signed the release, and we climbed aboard an old "goony bird" airplane and went down the runway. The sergeant had left the door open. When we got up in the air I said, "Aren't you going to close the door?"

And he said, "It's too hot."

And so we flew up to Da Nang, and I'll never forget that meeting as long as I live. Men came in from the battle areas and stacked their rifles at the door of the building. Three of their number had been killed that previous week, and we held a memorial service for them and had a meeting. Soldiers of the Jewish faith were to have had the building that night—it was Saturday—and when they saw how many of us there were (there were only about a dozen of them), they generously said, "You go back in and use the building."

When the meeting was over, we were loaded into an army ambulance and taken to stay the night in an unfinished field hospital. It was made of components that were being bolted together—produced in the States and shipped to Vietnam. The windows were all sealed and the air-conditioning wasn't working, so it was like an oven. To take a shower we had a big barrel of water with a dipper. All through the night fighter aircraft were flying north, and we wondered how many of them would come back.

We went down to Nha Trang on Sunday morning and held a wonderful meeting there. We had the sacrament with men who hadn't had the sacrament in months.

For me that was a great and significant and unforgettable experience.

Number nine:

I had a long-remembered meeting with Mr. Shimon Peres of Israel. He was a former prime minister. He had seen much of conflict and trouble in his time.

I asked him whether there was any solution to the great problems that constantly seem to divide the people of Israel and the Palestinians. He replied, "Of course there is."

As I recall, he said, "When we were Adam and Eve, we were all one. Is there any need for us now to be divided into segments with hatred for one another?"

He told a very interesting story that he said he had heard from a Muslim. The Muslim told of a Jewish rabbi who was conversing with two of his friends. The rabbi asked one of the men, "How do you know when the night is over and a new day has begun?"

His friend replied, "When you look into the east and can distinguish a sheep from a goat, then you know the night is over and the day has begun."

The second was asked the same question. He replied, "When you look into the distance and can distinguish an olive tree from a fig tree, then you know morning has come."

They then asked the rabbi how he could tell when the night is over and the day has begun. He thought for a time and then said, “When you look into the east and see the face of a woman and you can say, ‘She is my sister.’ And when you look into the east and see the face of a man and can say, ‘He is my brother.’ Then you know the light of a new day has come.”

Think of that for a few moments, my dear friends. How eloquently it speaks of the true meaning of brotherhood.

And so, my brothers and sisters, I might go on. I have given you a sampling of significant occasions that have forever touched my life.

They have influenced my thinking and my behavior. They have affected my life in an unforgettable manner.

You likewise will have significant experiences. I hope that you will write them down and keep a record of them, that you will read them from time to time and refresh your memory of these meaningful and significant things.

Some of them may be funny. Some may be of significance only to you. Some of them may be sacred and quietly beautiful. Some may build one upon another until they represent a lifetime of special experience. So it was with the girl I married nearly 70 years ago. My

experiences with her stand out vividly in my memory. I cannot forget them. When she was young I was bewitched and in love. That love strengthened through the years. She came to be a woman of recognized capacity. She traveled across the world with me and spoke on every continent, giving encouragement and bearing her testimony. She authored books. She was once honored here as the woman of the year.

A chair at this university carries her name.

She left me two and a half years ago. The resulting loneliness never entirely disappears. On the granite marker at her grave site are inscribed the words “Beloved Eternal Companion.” Such she is and such she always will be.

I remind you that the association you now enjoy as students is probably the best time of your lives to find your own “Beloved Eternal Companion.” Do so with a prayer in your heart. It will be the most important decision you will ever make. It will influence your life from now through all eternity.

God bless you, my beloved friends. May this be a wonderful season in your lives as you attend this great Church-sponsored university is my humble prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.