

Feel and Follow the Holy Spirit

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In the late 1940s a young man named Tom was at a dance for the freshman class at the University of Utah. As he was dancing with a girl from West High School, a young lady from East High came dancing by. Tom took one look and decided that there was a young lady he needed to meet. However, she danced away and the evening concluded before Tom could dance with this mystery girl, much less find out her name. Several months later, while waiting for a streetcar at Thirteenth East and Second South in Salt Lake City, Tom looked up and could hardly believe his eyes! There was the young lady he had seen at the dance! She was with another young lady and a young man who Tom recognized from his days in grade school. However, Tom couldn't remember his name. He squared his shoulders and plunged into his opportunity.

Tom walked up to the young man and said, "Hello, my old friend from grade-school days."

The young man responded, "I can't remember your name."

Tom told the boy his name and then was introduced to Frances Johnson, who later became his wife (from Thomas S. Monson, *Be Your Best Self* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979], 131).

I wonder if Tom ever wonders what would have happened had he not gone to the fresh-

man dance? What if he had decided to go somewhere else? What if he had decided that he was too tired or didn't want to go dancing that night? Was Tom's sudden interest in Frances just a random thing or was it something more than that?

We may not know the answers to these questions, although we certainly seem to enjoy asking them, but I believe some greater questions could be examined. Let's assume that Tom had indeed felt the prompting of the Spirit that evening at the dance. Could he have felt what he did if he had been behaving in a disorderly manner? What if Tom had decided to just hang out with his buddies at the refreshment table? What if there had been something amiss in his life that would have prevented him from feeling the Spirit? How is it that the future President Thomas S. Monson was in the right place at the right time?

Young Nephi was another great example of someone who also was in the right place at the right time. After his family had left Jerusalem and camped in the wilderness, Nephi and his brothers were sent back to Jerusalem—at no small risk—by their father. Their mission was

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to obtain and bring back the plates of brass that were in the possession of Laban. When things did not go so well on their first few attempts, Nephi's brothers were ready to quit, but Nephi held firm and on several occasions declared to his brothers: "Let us be faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord" (1 Nephi 3:16; 4:1). Later, when Nephi went alone, while his brothers hid outside the city, he said, "And I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do" (1 Nephi 4:6).

Where might we be today if Nephi had decided to go somewhere else—or that he just didn't want to go? Could he have felt the Spirit if he had been behaving in a disorderly manner? I believe that these men were in the right place at the right time because they were able to both feel and follow the Spirit.

Laman and Lemuel, on the other hand, seemed to demonstrate qualities more like the people described in Helaman 12:4, where we read:

O how foolish, and how vain, and how evil, and how devilish, and how quick to do iniquity, and how slow to do good, are the children of men; yea, how quick to hearken unto the words of the evil one, and to set their hearts upon the vain things of the world!

In the early 1800s, at the time of the beginning of the restoration of the gospel, the attitudes of many religions seemed to focus upon how foolish, vain, evil, devilish, quick to do iniquity, and slow to do good people really were.

In New England in particular, dancing was severely frowned on, the belief being that people should be continuously occupied with work so as not to be drawn into vain amusements of the world that would surely entice them to greater temptations and lead, finally, to the loss of their souls to sin. The clergy condemned not only dancing, but almost any other pastime that appeared to give

worldly pleasure. [Larry V. Shumway, "Dancing the Buckles off Their Shoes in Pioneer Utah," *BYU Studies* 37, no. 3 (1997–98): 10]

No wonder the great English writer Charles Dickens confirmed how dreary and staid life in America appeared to him. After spending three days on a steamboat traveling from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati, he wrote:

At dinner, there is nothing to drink upon the table, but great jugs full of cold water. Nobody says anything, at any meal, to anybody. All the passengers are very dismal, and seem to have tremendous secrets weighing on their minds. There is no conversation, no laughter, no cheerfulness, no sociality, except in spitting; and that is done in silent fellowship round the stove, when the meal is over. [Charles Dickens, *American Notes* (1842), chapter 11]

Joseph Smith was not like the other clergymen of his time. His appreciation for many so-called "vain amusements of the world" helps us to understand how our Church differed significantly from many of the other religions of that day. Leona Holbrook, the first chair of what eventually became the Department of Dance at BYU, wrote the following about the Prophet Joseph:

He enjoyed pistol shooting, baseball, walking, hiking, wrestling and horseback riding. . . . According to his own writings, he ice skated and engaged in "pulling sticks," a popular sport of those days. . . .

Joseph Smith was a competent, skillful performer in active sports, he encouraged others in those events, and promoted many other recreational activities. He favored music, drama, boating . . . , dancing, and wood cutting bees.

In his own words, "A large party supped at my house, and spent the evening in music, dancing, etc., in a most cheerful and friendly manner" (HC 6:134). [Leona Holbrook, "Dancing as an

Aspect of Early Mormon and Utah Culture," *BYU Studies* 16, no. 1 (autumn 1975): 121–22]

In the early days of the Church it quickly became apparent that the feelings toward appropriate recreational activities seemed to revolve around not what the activity was but rather what environment was the activity performed in, what kind of influence did it have upon the individual, and whether the Spirit of the Lord could be present. Or, in other words, it was all about being in the right place at the right time and doing the right thing for the right reason.

I would now like to talk more specifically about counsel that we have received over the years regarding dance in the Latter-day Saint culture. However, for those of you who do not dance, I believe this same counsel could, and should, be applied to a wide variety of similar recreational activities.

In March of 1844 a letter addressed to the editor of the *Times and Seasons*, the official Church publication, queried:

I should be very much gratified by your informing me, and not only me, but the public . . . , what your views are in regard to balls and dancing, as it has lately existed in our city. ["To the Editor," Times and Seasons 5, no. 5 (1 March 1844): 459]

John Taylor, the editor, responded as follows:

There certainly can be no harm in dancing in and of itself, as an abstract principle, but like all other athletic exercises, it has a tendency to invigorate the system and to promote health. . . . Therefore, looking at dancing merely as an athletic exercise, or as something having a tendency to add to the grace and dignity of man, by enabling him to have a more easy and graceful attitude, certainly no one could object to it. . . .

. . . But when it leads people into bad company and causes them to keep untimely hours, it has a

tendency to enervate and weaken the system, and lead to profligate and intemperate habits. ["To the Editor," 459, 60]

We can see here that the leaders of the Church did not appear to object to dancing in and of itself, but they did have definite concerns about the environment and company in which the dancing might take place. Even during those early years of the Church, the danger of keeping untimely hours was preached—a lesson that today still seems hard for some young people to learn. The important thing—then as now—was not so much the activity itself but rather the time, the place, and the environment.

After the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Brigham Young became the leader of the Church. This was a most difficult time for the Latter-day Saints. The people in Nauvoo experienced unbelievable hardships, yet even so they managed to find rejuvenation and relief through activities—including dancing. How would the Church, with a new leader, feel about these types of activities? We find one answer from an experience that took place as the Saints were preparing for their exodus.

After a full day of temple worship, the Saints gathered again in the house of the Lord, where they shared some excellent music, both instrumental and vocal. Then President Brigham Young broke the gravity of the scene by getting up and dancing, and he was joined by a number of others. Following this the president made a short address. Helen Mar Whitney recounted that he “said that we could worship God in the dance, as well as in other ways.” He went on to say:

Now, as to dancing in this house—there are thousands of brethren and sisters that have labored to build these walls and put on this roof, and they are shut out from any opportunity of enjoying any amusement among the wicked—or in the world, and shall they have any recreation? Yes! and this

is the very place where they can have liberty. [“Scenes in Nauvoo, and Incidents from H. C. Kimball’s Journal,” *Woman’s Exponent* 12, no. 8 (15 September 1883): 57, 58; also included in Helen Mar Whitney, *A Woman’s View: Helen Mar Whitney’s Reminiscences of Early Church History*, ed. Jeni Broberg Holzapfel and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1997), 313]

After the Saints left Nauvoo, they still danced. Countless stories are recorded of the Saints gathering around their campfires at the end of a day’s trek and dancing into the night on dance floors of dust, mud, or even packed-down snow. Their music wasn’t what we hear today: maybe a violin or a coronet, other times a whistler or two, and of course they could sing—but, yes, they always danced! (See Davis Bitton, “‘These Licentious Days’: Dancing Among the Mormons,” *Sunstone* 2, no. 1 [spring 1977]: 16–27; this paper by Davis Bitton was originally prepared for presentation to the staff of the LDS Church Historical Department on 14 May 1976.)

In the mid-1800s a new “round” dance, called the waltz, was catching on in America. For the first time the gentleman actually placed his hand on his lady’s waist and faced her at close proximity. They then circled the dance floor in a whirling and free manner, which is why the term *round* was used. This was a huge change from the line dances and reels that had been done for many years. Those dances had been carefully structured, ordered, and controlled. Some individuals saw this change in social dancing as symbolic of a breakdown in the order and structure in society. The man and the woman in proximity, along with the closed dance position, was indicative to them of a general and pervading moral decline (see Davis Bitton, “‘These Licentious Days,’” 25).

Jesse N. Smith, president of the Eastern Arizona Stake, reported that “the round dance [had] been termed ‘the dance of death’”

(in *Journal of Jesse Nathaniel Smith: The Life Story of a Mormon Pioneer, 1834–1906* (Salt Lake City: Jesse N. Smith Family Association, 1953), 258).

The leaders of the Church responded to the waltz and other round dances in a cautious and careful manner. Guidelines were put forward that initially allowed for two or three round dances to be included at Church dances. However, their expressed concerns were primarily about the environment in which the dancing took place. Counsel was given that dancing was best done among other members of the Church. The Brethren were not comfortable with “public dancing” because of the worldly elements that could not be controlled. Dancing was fine to do, but on our own terms, not those of the world.

A practice that was part of LDS culture for many years had to do with dancing and departing missionaries. Shortly before the young elder left for the mission field, a dance in his honor took place in the cultural hall of the church. In the February 1904 issue of the *Improvement Era*, Don C. W. Musser explained why the Latter-day Saints would find this appropriate. He said:

*They find nothing incompatible with their ideas of true religion, in the innocent pleasure of dancing. In fact, like God’s people of ancient times, they find this one way of rejoicing together, and of giving vent to their feelings of gratitude for blessings daily received. In early times, while pushing their handcarts across the plains, they frequently danced under the light of the moon and stars, and around their camp fires, because their hearts were so full of praise, words could not express it, and they had to dance. And it has always been a custom with them, to give their departing missionaries a farewell . . . , and in no way can this end be better accomplished than in a dance. [Don C. W. Musser, “A Peculiar Custom of a Peculiar People,” *Improvement Era* 7, no. 4 (February 1904): 297–98]*

It was at his missionary farewell dance that young Spencer W. Kimball was introduced to a pretty blonde girl who was new in the valley: Camilla Eyring. I would like to paraphrase the story as it appears in the biography of President Kimball, written by his sons Edward and Andrew. Shortly following his mission Spencer picked up the local newspaper one evening and noticed a photograph and article in the upper right-hand corner. It was about Camilla, who was now teaching home economics at the Gila Academy. He read the article several times and then said aloud to himself, "I am going to marry her."

He lost no time in asking around about Camilla and discovered that she lived with her parents in Pima—several miles down the valley. She rode the bus to Thatcher each day to teach at the Academy. Well, one day soon after that, when Camilla arrived at the bus stop in Thatcher to return home, there was Spencer—on his way to visit his friend Lawrence Holladay, who just happened to live in Pima. During the bus ride "Spencer talked about Shakespeare and art, certain that was the way to a teacher's heart." Before the ride ended Spencer asked Camilla if he might call on her sometime, and she invited him to do so.

One evening a short time later, Spencer showed up at her house unannounced. Camilla was preparing to go dancing with another boy named Alvin, but she sat on the porch and visited with Spencer anyway. When it became apparent to her that Spencer had no intention of leaving soon, she said she "fudged." A crowd of people were going dancing, she told him. Would he like to come along? And so it was that when Alvin drove up, he found two people waiting to pile into the car. As you might imagine, Alvin was not very happy with this arrangement, and he applied his foot to the accelerator to show his anger. Camilla said later that Alvin drove "like the devil was after him." By the time they arrived at the dance, Alvin was so mad he decided he was through

with Camilla—which goes to show you that one man's bad luck is another's good fortune! (From Edward L. Kimball and Andrew E. Kimball, Jr., *Spencer W. Kimball: Twelfth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1977], 71, 83–84.)

I wonder if Spencer ever wondered what would have happened if he had not arranged to be at the bus stop? What if he had decided that he was too tired or didn't want to go to the effort that afternoon? Was Spencer's sudden interest in Camilla just a random thing or was it something more than that? How is it that the future President Spencer W. Kimball, along with Camilla, was in the right place at the right time?

In 1912 the First Presidency addressed dancing as part of their annual Christmas message to the Church. They recognized that dancing parties were

*a diversion permitted to Latter-day Saints, but under certain rules that ought to be strictly observed. The indiscriminate association of saints and strangers in public balls . . . is not productive of that good and wholesome spirit that is desirable. . . . Dances that require or permit the close embrace and suggestive movements . . . ought to be utterly prohibited. . . . The shameless exhibitions of the human form purposely presented in modern styles of dress, or rather undress, are indications of that sensuous and debasing tendency toward moral laxity and social corruption. [In James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75), 4:280–81]*

Every generation seems to feel the need to discover themselves through something new. Many of you are too young to remember the 1960s, but they were the era of bell-bottoms, platform shoes, love beads, mood rings, tie-dyed T-shirts, hippies, bouffant hairdos, go-go boots, miniskirts, and—to top all this off—a whole slew of new dances such as the twist,

the mashed potato, the monkey, the swim, the funky chicken, the dog, the locomotion, the shampoo, and the jerk. Finally we didn't have to worry about dancing too close to each other—but wait, now there was a whole new set of concerns! The 1966 *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet added some additional counsel for the young people regarding dance. Here are a few excerpts:

If one concentrates on good dance posture, many dances can be danced in a manner which will meet LDS standards. Some examples of these dances are the waltz, fox trot, tango, rhumba, cha-cha, samba, [and] swing. . . .

. . . Members of the Church should be good dancers and not contortionists. Extreme body movements—such as hip and shoulder shaking, body jerking, etc.—should be avoided, and emphasis should be placed on smooth styling and clever footwork. [For the Strength of Youth, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1966), 13]

In an issue of *Brigham Young Magazine* a few years ago, we learned that this counsel was not entirely taken to heart, for in 1966 the president had found it necessary to ban fad dances at BYU!

The monkey, the dog, the frug—everyone at BYU was doing them; that is, until President Wilkinson gave a controversial speech at the beginning of the year banning all fad dances. The student body split into two opposing camps, one arguing that such dances were indeed against Church standards, the other saying that there was nothing wrong with them. Discussions grew heated, and prejudiced letters to the editor filled the columns of the Universe until the issue was finally settled by a letter from President McKay. [The] verdict—No [fad dances]. [1966 Banyan: The Yearbook of the Associated Students of Brigham Young University, May 1966, vol. 52, 174; excerpted in “Stories of

the Century,” Brigham Young Magazine, winter 1999–2000, 29]

Now we can see why Beginning Social Dance 180 became so popular at BYU back then: fully one-half of the student body agreed on the dances that best met LDS standards! They were the waltz, fox-trot, cha-cha, and swing! Actually, I believe that Beginning Social Dance has great value to the entire university community. Not only do the almost 2,000 students each year who take this course learn beginning social dances, but they also learn social skills and graces, etiquette, and how to interact with the opposite sex in appropriate ways. If you see in the mirror the type of person that Charles Dickens saw in 1842, then you might want to enroll in Beginning Social Dance 180. And for you single brethren, there is always the chance that things could turn out for you like they did for Presidents Kimball and Monson!

The most recent *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet reads a lot like the 1966 version. In fact, it sounds a lot like what the First Presidency said in 1912, as well as the counsel that was given when the waltz became popular. And, yes, what John Taylor had to say really wasn't much different either.

As we go back to our roots as a church, it becomes clearly apparent how consistent the counsel and instruction has been from our leaders. What a powerful lesson we can learn, and not just about dancing: to appreciate the wisdom of placing ourselves in situations where the Spirit of the Lord can be present. Perhaps it really does make a difference where we are, what we are doing, and when we are doing it.

I have firsthand knowledge about being in the right place at the right time. Back in the early 1970s we did not register for classes online. In fact, there was no such thing as a desktop or laptop computer. We had to register the “prehistoric” way. On the day before the

start of the semester we would first assemble in the green seats in the Smith Fieldhouse: graduate students and seniors first, then on from there until it was time for the freshmen to register. When our turn came, we would stand up and follow a never-ending line through the underground tunnel to the Richards Building. As we emerged, we were inspected for compliance with the university dress and grooming standards. If we passed that test, we were then allowed to enter the various gymnasiums and begin the registration process. Hundreds of tables, each with a line of hopeful students, filled the gyms. To enroll in a class you had to stand in a specific line to see if any computer punch cards for the section you wanted were available. One bad result, especially near the end of the process, could really foul things up and require you to start all over again.

One early January morning in 1973 I was a student teaching assistant helping give out cards for the ballroom dance classes at registration. All of a sudden along came a pretty, black-haired freshman, new in town for the winter semester and hoping to gain admittance to the ballroom dance team. The moment I saw her I knew that for some reason I had to meet this girl. Helping to give out registration cards was the perfect way to facilitate my sudden objective, so when classes began the next day, I knew where Linda Marie Baes would be at a certain time each day.

Linda had been willing to leave her home in Tennessee as a nonmember and come to this Mormon university because she felt compelled to continue with the ballroom dancing that she had been involved in. Linda's dance teacher in Oak Ridge just happened to know Alma Heaton here at BYU. Linda had been offered a small dance scholarship for the previous fall semester but had chickened out when her Catholic priest described in great detail how many wives everybody would have here in Utah. Well, one thing led to another (you know how that goes), and that summer Linda

asked me if I would baptize her a member of the Church. A year later I asked her the question that I had had on my mind since we first met, and, lucky for me, she said yes. Since then Linda and I have had a wonderful life, spending much of our time together each day doing something we both love in the same building where we first met.

Was my sudden interest in Linda just a random thing or was it something more than that? In my mind I know the answer to that question without a doubt. What if I had been disinclined that day to go and help out with the registration process? What if things had been amiss in my life? What if Linda had come to BYU the previous September when my high-school sweetheart and I were still dating? How is it that we just happened to be in the right place at the right time? I have a personal testimony that it does make a difference when you can not only feel but also follow the Spirit.

This past month the BYU Ballroom Dance Company traveled to Europe, where we competed at the British Open Ballroom Dancing Championships and then continued with a performance tour that took us through England, Belgium, France, and Spain. We won both the modern and the Latin-American formation team competitions, bringing our count to 18 titles won at this most prestigious event. However, the competition experience was not the most important reason for our going to Europe.

After we competed in Blackpool and began our performance tour, the Ballroom Dance Company had opportunities to help further the work of the Church in a number of ways. It was not uncommon to have stake and mission presidents express appreciation for the good that had been accomplished and the success they anticipated in their areas as a result of our visit. In France and Spain we had significant opportunities to perform before important government officials in settings and ways that could be best accomplished only by a BYU

performing group. We had the highest expectations placed upon us by the Church and the university. We could not have met those expectations without conscious efforts to both feel and follow the Spirit.

These efforts began before we ever left the Richards Building in the form of a letter of counsel from our dean, Robert K. Conlee. He reminded us of the real reasons that we were going on this particular tour. He pointedly asked us to always behave in such a way that we would be eligible to have the Spirit manifest itself through us, individually and collectively, so that the purposes of the Lord might be fulfilled.

Today I can testify of the blessings, both individual and collective, that flowed to the Ballroom Dance Company as we lived each day with this wise counsel in our minds. How thankful I am to have the opportunity to work at Brigham Young University, where this type of devotion is not just tolerated but encouraged—even expected. I also bear testimony of the blessings we can and will receive in our personal lives as we make efforts to be in the right places at the right times and to do the right things for the right reasons. By following the counsel of our Church leaders, we will be better able to feel and follow the Holy Spirit in our lives and realize great blessings. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.