

My Book of Life

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God-Given Gifts

The subject I would like to address this morning is entitled “My Book of Life.” Basic to my book of life and to your book of life is the fact that each one of us has been endowed with a God-given ability to think and to make decisions. Our creative capacity and intelligence distinguishes us from all other forms of life on this earth. We are truly the sons and daughters of our Father in Heaven who is the Master Creator. As we know, “the glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth” (D&C 93:36).

With our inherited gift of intelligence, our Heavenly Father has also given us a gift of choice known as “free agency.” We are free to act for ourselves but must take the responsibility for those decisions (see 2 Nephi 10:23). This capacity to knowingly choose for ourselves is according to the Lord’s great master plan for all of his children.

By using your gift of intelligence and your gift of choice, you become responsible for your life. Each day decisions must be made. These decisions are recorded either in memory or in your personal book of remembrance, or possibly in a heavenly book. Day by day, page by page, your book continues to grow. These pages are assembled into chapters, and the

summation of these chapters becomes your book of life.

As you finish your book of life here on this earth, you move on to another life. Just as one chapter in this life fades into another, so your mortal life, as it ends, fades into another. Each ending is but a new beginning.

You should remember that your book of life largely forms the basic material the Lord will use in his final judgment as he considers your life in relationship to the many variables that affected your life. It will be your basic record.

Some of the pages in your book of life may not speak well for you and might adversely affect the Lord’s final judgment. We should be eternally grateful for another heavenly gift called “repentance,” and especially to the Lord Jesus Christ for his atoning sacrifice which makes “repentance” possible. With that gift you can erase part or all of the undesirable pages in your book of life or remove them completely. This gift can make of your book of life a positive, wholesome, and complete

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record forming a witness of a happy, well-lived life. Repentance should not be delayed or procrastinated.

A Wonderful Chapter in My Book of Life

As I have studied my personal book of life, I have found that it divides approximately into five-year chapters. This very month of May is bringing to an end my present chapter and marks the beginning of a new chapter. It is an appropriate time for this change since tomorrow is my birthday. I appreciate this well-attended celebration of my birthday very much. It will be long remembered.

This new chapter coming up will actually begin as we move to Tokyo, Japan, to begin serving in the Asian presidency with responsibilities in Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Malaysia, India, and many other areas in the Pacific. We learned of this new calling directly following general conference. We are preparing to leave the first of August. My wife will serve as an Area General Board representative of the Relief Society, the Primary, and the Young Women. This will truly bring about a significant change and a new and exciting chapter in my life.

The present chapter in my book of life, which also began in the month of May five years ago, brought a significant change in my life. It happened on May 21, 1980—almost five years ago to the day. It started with a telephone call to my architect office. A lady's voice asked for me and then referred me to Arthur Haycock, President Kimball's executive secretary. We exchanged pleasant greetings, and then Brother Haycock indicated someone else wanted to talk with me.

Can you imagine how I felt when President Spencer W. Kimball came on the line and said: "Brother Wilcox, you haven't been in to see me recently." I responded that I would like to drop in but didn't think I ought to take his time. He thought it would be well if I did come in, so we arranged for a meeting on Friday at 2:00 p.m.

When I walked into the Church Administration Building, I really received red carpet treatment as soon as it was learned that I had a date with President Kimball. After entering his office, he came around the desk and embraced me. He kissed me on both cheeks and asked me to sit in a comfortable chair next to his desk. He expressed his interest in my practice as an architect and wanted to learn more concerning the design of the Washington Temple and the Missionary Training Center. President Kimball had dedicated these buildings and had a great interest in both projects. This led to a very interesting conversation. He then asked me whether I had wondered for what purpose I was visiting with him. I let him know that this had occurred to me. He replied, "We would like you to serve as president of the Ogden Temple and your wife to be the matron. Can you both accept?" I did as you would have done. I let out a little gasp, thought for a moment, and then replied, "Yes, we are prepared. We can accept. When do you wish us to begin?"

The reason that I could be so prompt in responding to this call is that my wife and I had each received a witness a few months before that this would happen.

My wife and I love to go to the temple. We usually attend at least once a week. One afternoon we were sitting in an endowment session, enjoying it fully, when it was as if a voice spoke to me to let me know that I was to be the next president of that temple. I was startled. I couldn't concentrate on anything after that. On the way out of the temple I asked how long the current president had served and was told that it had been four years. This relieved me somewhat. I thought that temple presidents served for five years. Later, I found out these calls were from three to five years. I did not sleep well that night. The impression would not leave my mind.

The next day my wife, Viva May, and I went for a drive up to our Ogden Valley cabin. On the return trip I had an impulse and pulled

over to the side of the road. I told Viva May that I had something to share with her and said: "I believe that we are going to be called into the temple as president and matron."

Her response was different. In fact, she laughed. Then I found out why. At the same time I had received my impression of serving there, she also had been given a gift in her mind's eye of traveling all through the temple. She saw places she had never seen before, even though we had worked together very closely some years before when I served as general chairman of the public showing and dedication services for that temple. Because we had both received these experiences, it helped us to prepare to serve.

We had recently returned from presiding in the Indiana Indianapolis Mission. Instead of searching for new work in my newly re-opened practice of architecture and committing myself to projects I wouldn't be able to complete, we had taken steps to close the practice even before President Kimball's call because of the witness we each had experienced.

One question I asked President Kimball before leaving his office concerned my continuing to serve as a legislator in the Utah House of Representatives. I had filed for re-election and was unopposed. I told President Kimball I knew I could win. Did he have any suggestions for me? With a twinkle in his eyes, he said, "Yes, I would suggest you give your full time to this new calling." And that we did for nearly five years. It became another wonderful and spiritual chapter in my book of life.

Lessons Through the Years

As I look back at each of the five-year intervals that form the many chapters of my life, there were lessons learned within each chapter. Perhaps sharing a few of these lessons would be helpful to you as you create your own book of life.

At the end of my first five-year chapter, I came to realize what a blessing it was to have a

loving father and mother. It was a great source of strength to have my mother at home with my brothers and me. As a little tyke I would often run into our home, walk up to my mother, and ask her if there was anything she needed. She would assure me that she was all right and that I could go back out to play some more. Actually, I just wanted to be real sure my mother was there. How grateful I am that she was always there. Her presence was basic to a happy and reassured childhood.

Our home on Lincoln Street in Salt Lake City was a place in which mother took great pride. When I drew a picture on her wallpaper, though, Mother didn't scold me. She didn't even erase it, but showed it with pride to everyone who came to our home. It was the artwork of her son.

My second and third five-year chapters were lived in Holladay, Utah, on a two-acre site situated on Wander Lane. How grateful I will always be to my folks for rearing us in a place where we could run, hunt, ski, and hike. My most vivid memories of those two chapters of my life are of Primary, Church, Scouting, and good friends. Mother was Primary president and Dad was one of our Scout leaders. What a blessing that was. As you rear your children, be an example to them so they will become strong leaders for tomorrow. Rear them in a loving atmosphere where they feel loved and secure to bring about a happy chapter in your book of life and also in theirs.

My third chapter was coming to an end when I was fourteen. I have memories of many friends, but some of those friends made my life difficult. They were my peer group. Some of those friends wanted me to do things that were contrary to what I had been taught in Sunday School and Mutual and at home. What a difficult summer I had resisting the pressures of those friends to try tobacco, beer, and other unwholesome things.

My heart goes out to young people of our day who have even greater peer pressures now

with the insidious evils of our world aimed at them—evils including hard drugs, pornography, and immorality.

Two developments came to my rescue during my trial. The first was my patriarchal blessing. I remember the day I received it vividly. It took place in Hyrum, Utah. My grandfather's brother gave three blessings that day to my two brothers and to me. In my blessing I learned that I had lived before this life, and that there was a great mission and a life of usefulness lying before me. I also learned that I had, in spirit form, chosen the right and stood valiant for the mission of my Redeemer and the free agency of man. I was told that my spirit had been held in reserve to come forth in this day. I had been born of goodly parents under gospel rights. My patriarchal blessing became a guide to me then and for the rest of my life. It was revealed that the Lord expected me to be a standard-bearer among the people. My life was important to the Lord and I knew it.

The second factor that came to my rescue was a decision that took the entire summer to make. Should I take art, which I dearly loved, or seminary (whatever that was) as an elective at Granite High School? I finally selected seminary. Reluctantly, I went to my first class and sat slouching on the back row, almost defying the teacher to teach me anything. Before the class was over, I was sitting up and listening intently. The teacher was a master teacher. The next day I couldn't wait to get there. In fact, I sat on the front row. He began teaching the Old Testament. He made it come alive for me. As I listened, I began to illustrate all the great scenes that I could imagine as he taught of Moses leading the children of Israel out of Egypt. I created my own art course.

That master teacher was William E. Berrett, who later became one of the great leaders of the seminary-institute programs throughout the Church, with headquarters here at BYU.

I will always remember and be grateful that Brother Barrett, in teaching the Ten

Commandments, made them a part of my life. They were more than ancient commandments. Honesty, integrity, honoring father and mother, morality, and the other commandments were meant for all people in all ages. These values became part and parcel of my life.

I could only attend that class for six months because my family moved to Ogden before the year was over, and seminary was no longer available. But that one class I did attend gave my life eternal direction and became basic to my book of life. I pray that these values can be found in your book of life.

My fourth and fifth five-year chapters involved my education. I had to choose between art, which I loved, and a more difficult subject called engineering. After much discussion with my professors, I decided to major in engineering. How thankful I am that I did so because it made a student of me. The subjects of mathematics, calculus, and the technical phases of engineering and related laboratory work caused me to study and to learn to think. Later, when I changed my profession to architecture, these subjects were extremely helpful. In these chapters of my book of life I learned the great value of education: both formal and personal study. I hope your book of life will always reflect your willingness to study and to learn.

Vital Parts of My Life

The sixth chapter of my book of life took place right here in Provo. I had married my college sweetheart in the Logan Temple and finished my assignment as an ensign in the navy at age twenty-five. I was offered an engineering job at Geneva Steel. This was a good experience where I gained professional perspective. It proved to be a good beginning point.

We found an apartment in Provo and enjoyed five delightful years in this beautiful city. During this time I was deciding what I wanted out of engineering and what I wanted

out of art. I was offered an engineering job with a Provo architect, the late Fred L. Markham, who designed several of the BYU buildings. One of the projects of the firm was the Eyring Science Center, where I spent much of each day supervising the construction of that great building. I also became good friends with Dr. Carl Eyring, who taught me much of acoustics and physical science.

On the side I did some engineering work for those who were filing for patents on inventions. I also taught a class at Utah Technical School. With my art I started a cartoon strip called "Slim Pickens," a cowboy strip. The *Provo Daily Herald* liked it and so did the *Deseret News*. Both papers published my daily cartoons for over a year. They were really fun to write and draw.

Life was busy with a full-time job, two part-time jobs, a cartoon strip, and several Church jobs. But this chapter formed a foundation for my future as an architect in the art and profession that I really loved, but had not studied yet.

With the permission of my employer, Fred Markham, I decided to go back to school and study architecture. I took afternoon classes two days a week at the University of Utah while still holding down a full-time job. In three quarters I moved up to a fourth year level. With that much schooling behind me, I decided to "go for it." With two children by now and one on the way, we left for the University of Oregon to pursue my fifth year of architectural studies. As a full-time student, my progress came faster than expected. At the end of the first quarter I was moved into the graduate school and succeeded in earning a master of architecture degree by the end of the school year. Now I was ready to set up my own practice. I had the two degrees and finally was into the art that I loved.

Education has been an important and vital part of my book of life. I'm sure it is in yours, or you would not be here today. My experience taught me that education is the best investment

possible in this life and a mission for the Church is the best part of that education.

The next four chapters of my book are filled with service in the Church, my family, and my twenty-year practice as a professional architect. I was called to serve as a bishop and later as a stake president. These were wonderful, busy, productive, and happy years.

As a stake president I sent out into the world 337 missionaries. I hadn't served a mission myself because of my service during the war. When I would interview a missionary from my stake, I would often say, "I wish I could go with you." Well, one day the Lord heard me. I received a call to serve as president of the Indiana Indianapolis Mission, just after President Kimball became president of the Church.

Since beginning my service as a mission president in July of 1974, my life has largely been given to Church service—the latest calling being that of a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy.

Keeping My Priorities in Order

One lesson has repeated itself in each chapter of my book of life. It is a very important lesson concerning priorities. I was fortunate to learn this lesson early. Yet it had to be relearned. Following my graduation from engineering school, while I awaited my naval commission, I worked a few months for Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Co. in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania. It was here that the truth of this lesson came through to me in such a way that I have never changed in giving my first priority to my family and my church.

Perhaps it was living in the world away from home that caused the Church to become very important to me. I had been concentrating on my schooling and graduation. Fraternity life hadn't helped. Now I was alone in the world. How welcome were those few members of the Church I met in a small branch in downtown Pittsburgh. Those members became immediate

friends. And as I later traveled in the navy, I found such friends wherever I was stationed. How wonderful to have friends. Latter-day Saints everywhere are friends.

In the navy I was tested, as are all servicemen. But my fellow officers soon learned that I was completely serious about my church and the keeping of the Lord's commandments. My skipper practically ordered me to have lunch with him and found it humorous to order me a soft drink while he ordered his drink of liquor while standing at the bar. We were roommates during that time when we commissioned the ship. I discovered how much he admired my way of life when he asked me to serve on the ship as ship's chaplain as well as the engineering officer. This opened up opportunities for missionary work because the entire crew admired my way of life. It was a great opportunity.

I have found that I have never lost anything by living the commandments. A person can be friendly and yet resist evil among those with whom he associates. Example is the best teacher.

Shortly after my release from naval service, I accepted an engineering position at Geneva Steel. There were few Church members in that department. The plant had been built just prior to the war, and technical people generally had to be imported. After a few weeks I learned that there was to be a drinking party. All members of the department were expected to attend. When approached, I indicated that I did not plan to attend. This shocked the person approaching me.

Soon the manager of the engineering department came to see me personally. I wondered if this would terminate my employment. He walked up to my desk and told me that he had heard that I wasn't planning on attending his party. I told him that was right. He asked me why. I told him I was a Latter-day Saint and didn't drink and would just be in the way. He thought a few moments and observed that I would probably be the only sober one there.

Then he told me I could be very helpful to him. He asked me to serve as the chairman of the party, since I would be sober. He asked me to arrange for the dinner and the entertainment and other details. They would take care of the liquor. He told me that when the party started getting rough, my wife and I could slip out and go home. He didn't want to embarrass us. He asked me if I could help in this way.

I decided to accept this request. The other engineers and draftsmen soon began to notice that I had become the favorite of the boss. He knew I had principles and had the courage to live them. Instead of losing my job, I made very rapid headway.

I have found in each chapter of my life that keeping my priorities and not giving into the world has been a great asset. Another way of expressing this way of life is to determine to always say "yes" to the Lord and "no" to the world.

The Lord has expressed this great truth in scripture. In Matthew 6:33 he said, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." And in the Doctrine and Covenants he said, "Seek the kingdom of God, and all things shall be added according to that which is just" (D&C 11:23).

My life has been blessed beyond my power to describe because of my willingness to live by my simple priorities. It became the basis by which I was lifted and made equal to the design of the last two major projects of my architectural career. These were the Washington Temple and the Missionary Training Center here at Brigham Young University.

Let me tell you briefly about the Missionary Training Center, which was then known as the Language Training Mission. I received a telephone call on August 30 of 1973 and was asked to design this great missionary center. Two other firms would assist in the preparation of documents once the design was finalized, but I was to design the center. As the work of design

developed, I had to make a decision whether to postpone previously committed meetings in Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and the Caribbean, where I had been called to serve as Regional Representative, or to keep them regardless of the great need to design and construct this center as soon as possible.

I made my decision on the basis of my priorities. It was a hard decision. My relationship to the project was as a professional architect. My priority was to my church and my family ahead of my professional responsibilities. My work as a Regional Representative had to come first. There was much concern over this decision from those involved, since design was the first step and I had been entrusted with the design.

Then a marvelous thing happened. As I returned each week from my commitments there, even though quite exhausted, I received great surges of inspiration as I had in the design of the Washington Temple. Each week a major portion of the design developed, following my trips to the Florida area. By the end of October we were ready for the first presentation. It was well received by the directors and by BYU administration. After two additional weeks of refinement, the design drawings and a model were ready to present to the Church Education Department and to the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, where it received complete approval. We were told to immediately begin working on drawings and specifications and did so by November 15. This creative period had required but two and one-half months. It was a miracle.

By the spring of 1974 this project, the largest in BYU history, was ready for bidding. My call as a mission president was received in April. On the very day I reported to my mission the ground was being broken for the construction of the Missionary Training Center. My partners carried on the supervision of construction. I had felt the Lord's blessings in this project and have a deep testimony that the surges of inspiration

that I had experienced were a result of keeping my priorities.

My most important priority in my book of life has been my family. Our home has been graced by six beautiful daughters. There have been challenges, sickness, and struggles. We enjoyed the warmth of a wonderful family. Each daughter is now married to a returned missionary and each has the blessings of a temple marriage. When we go to the temple together we witness a little bit of celestial life here on this earth. That is what life is all about. Take time in your book of life to love and enjoy your family. Teach them correct principles. My counsel to you as a former temple president is to make the temple a continuing part of your life. Begin your married life with marriage in the house of the Lord.

It has been delightful to share some of the lessons I have learned over the years as recorded in my book of life. Use your God-given talents and creative gifts of intelligence and freedom of choice to write your book of life. Through proper repentance, erase or remove those pages which should not be kept.

I can promise you that living by simple priorities will bring joy and happiness now and in the eternities. Keep your church and family first in your life. Keep saying "yes" to the Lord and "no" to the world. Strive to live a Christ-like life of service.

I share with you my testimony that Jesus is the Christ and that his Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was restored in our day through the Prophet Joseph Smith. President Spencer W. Kimball is a prophet. Your book of life will be an everlasting credit to you, if, day by day, week by week, and year after year, you will love the Lord, love your neighbor as yourself, and keep God's commandments.

I leave my love, my testimony, and my blessings with you, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.