

The Ordeal of Lowry Nelson and the Mis-spoken Word

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ON 8 FEBRUARY 1979 LOWRY NELSON wrote to me about his operation. "At about one p.m. I experienced a seizure which racked my torso with terrible pain. I could think of no other thing but a heart attack." At Utah Valley Hospital in Provo, the diagnosis proved difficult, for at eighty-three the patient was deaf, blind in one eye, and with only 20/400 vision in the other. The doctor would write questions which a nurse would hold close to the functioning eye. After a series of tests, a note reported, "We do not think you had a heart attack."

This was comforting, "but did noting to allay the awesome pain." The search continued until the next day, when Lowry mentioned that he had prostate trouble. Then for ten hours a catheter drained a brownish fluid from his bladder. Following this, doctors removed the prostate, which was malignant, and to prevent metastasis, "My man-glands were removed."

It was typical of Lowry Nelson that his report of the operation was just a sidebar to the main thrust of his letter to me, which was a scathing critique of a talk given by Ezra Taft Benson of the Twelve Apostles advising LDS authors of the proper way to write about church matters (of which more later).

Lowry's male friends responded to news of his operation with ribald verse. Here are a couple of printable samples:

The bull deprived of his bullish glands,
Insists no more on his former demands.
Cows graze in peace on grasses tender,
For he now is of the neuter gender.

Another offered cold comfort:

A man who has reached his 80th year,
Doesn't need surgery to make him a steer.

So when you reach the age of four-score,
Go to bed to sleep and to dream—nothing more.

"Thanks for the medical report, and I'm glad you came out fighting," I wrote him. "At least you kept your gonads for 83 years, which is more than can be said for some Saints who never had any."

There had been an easy rapport between Lowry Nelson and me—two gadflies—for some fifty years, ever since we both belonged to a literary group of faculty members and students at Brigham Young University. Lowry was then dean of the College of Applied Science, while I was a brash, know-it-all student who had begun publishing in national magazines. Other faculty members of the group included M. Wilford Poulson, who was the entire psychology department. He was secretly accumulating his monumental library on early Mormonism. A. C. Lambert was also mining the same vein and secretly writing the untold story of LDS history and doctrine, a passion which lasted half a century. At this time we knew only that he was contributing to educational journals.

Both Lambert and Poulson got into serious trouble because of their research. When A. C.'s secret quest was discovered, I believe it cost him his position on the faculty. When Poulson published an article which established that the Word of Wisdom reflected popular public sentiment at the time Joseph Smith gave it as wise advice to the Saints, a local zealot tried to have him sacked at the university and tried for his membership for this heresy.

Other faculty members of the group included gentle Elsie C. Carroll, author and patron of the arts, who annually awarded a gold medal for the best Christmas story (and my search for the winner one year, Gay Dimick, ultimately resulted in marriage). Harrison R. Merrill, who later became editor of the *Improvement Era*, vied with Alfred Osmond for the title of "Poet Lariat," each contributing voluminous doggerel rhymes as commentary on the cultural scene to the *Provo Herald*. And I wonder whatever happened to doggerel verse anyhow? In my opinion this was the best writing of both Merrill and Osmond. And it was the only type of acceptable humor published in Provo at that time.

Alfred Osmond was the only member of that family whom I knew personally. He taught creative writing, and I will attest that his histrionics in reading a manuscript in class was a dramatic exhibition surpassing any subsequent performance by Donny and Marie. One morning in class I watched, fascinated, as a fly wandered close to the mobile mouth while Alf performed, the insect gleaning the remains of Professor Osmond's breakfast. And then—gulp—it vanished inside. "Swallowed a fly," he wheezed. He inserted his hand halfway to the wrist into his mouth, then triumphantly brought it forth. "And here it is!"

Professor Osmond had scant admiration for my literary output, nor did I for his. His criticism was always the same: "Come to the point at once." Atmosphere, characterization, dramatic progression, suspense, the narrative hook, the plants, the turnover at the climax—all this meant nothing to him. Of course I was writing for the national market, which he didn't understand, and he for the captive internal press, where the vital element was the faith-promoting factor.

He tried, however, to break into the big time. He wrote a novel, *Married Sweethearts*, and had it published by a local printer. "I know it would make a great movie," he said, "but I can't get anybody in Hollywood to read it." I admit that I tried to, and then I agreed with a student friend who said, "Nor anybody in Provo."

At this time I was working six hours a night, seven days a week, as night clerk at the Roberts Hotel in downtown Provo, also doubling as cashier for the cafe, switchboard operator, bellhop, and bookkeeper. In addition I typed the cafe menus, kept the furnace supplied with coal, and each night mopped the lobby. I also was precariously carrying a full class schedule, dating Gay Dimick, writing pulp fiction, and doing a column for the *Y News*. So admittedly I wasn't by any means a straight-A student. However, I flunked only two classes. One I walked out on. The other resulted from what I had considered a funny comment I made about a touchy professor.

Among students of the literary group was the beautiful Virginia Eggertson, who became the gifted author, Virginia Sorensen; Glenn Potter, an artist and writer, whose untimely death aborted a promising talent; Carleton Culmsee, who was to join the Utah State faculty and publish historical material; Max Taylor (no relation), who became an editor of a major New York publishing house (and who gave me the secret of writing a successful book: "Put 'How' in the title"); J. R. Paulson, editor of the *Y News*, on the threshold of a distinguished newspaper career. And there were several others in the group—all in all a lot of talent for a university of 1,500 students haunted by rumors that the church was going to close it down.

Lowry Nelson and I both left the Y because of conflicts with the establishment. In my case, after being suspended and readmitted six times because of my column in the *Y News*, I suspected that I wasn't really appreciated, so I never went back to complete my senior year. Lowry had been on the faculty twelve years when in 1934 a single word spoken in casual conversation caused him to narrowly escape being discharged in disgrace and excommunicated.

During that summer Dr. Oscar Russell, who had graduated from the Y and was professor of speech at Ohio State University, was visiting in Utah. He requested some materials from Lowry, who furnished four monographs on his studies of social economics. Then as Lowry went out to his car,

Russell followed, and they chatted for about ten minutes when Russell asked, "What is your attitude about immortality?"

Lowry hadn't really thought much about the subject. "I said I would have to consider myself an agnostic in the sense of not knowing," he reported. "I have never been taken up and shown the pearly gates."

He thought nothing about the incident. "That is not until I met a friend in Salt Lake who had seen Russell since his visit to Provo, and he reported that Russell had referred to me as a dangerous man, and he would never send his children to the BYU because I would undermine their faith."

Lowry wrote to Russell, "telling him that I was only saying, in effect, that immortality is a hypothesis and there was no way of testing it scientifically."

In reply Russell shot back a four-page letter. "Instead of the dialogue I expected," Lowry said, "here was a verbal diarrhetic tirade." Russell had also sent copies to President Franklin S. Harris of BYU, to Professor Guy C. Wilson, and to the LDS First Presidency, Heber J. Grant, David O. McKay, and J. Reuben Clark.

Lowry had shown his letter to Russell to Harris before mailing, asking if it should be sent, and Harris had replied, "Certainly." So when Lowry received notice to appear before the First Presidency, Harris went along. They found Heber J. Grant furious, while J. Reuben Clark said to Lowry, "You used a very unfortunate word in your letter." Lowry remained silent. "I wanted to say," he reported, "that I did not realize that I was writing to President Grant but was writing to a professional person who would understand the meaning of the word. President Grant said the matter would be turned over to the Commissioner of Education for further investigation. And that was it. We went home and waited."

The hearing was Friday. Lowry waited in suspense until Wednesday, when David O. McKay was the chapel speaker at BYU. After the ceremony McKay "put his arm around me and said, 'There will be no investigation.'"

Although this relieved the tension, Lowry realized how close the call had been because of a single word to a zealot. Subsequently he wrote in his memoirs, *Last Judgment* (1978), "I have often wondered since this episode in my life, how many persons of similar background when confronted with the question Russell put to me, would answer in the same way? . . . My attitude has not changed since 1934. I do not KNOW. . . . Nobody knows for certain about this matter, nor can they know, for nobody returns to bear witness to the fact of life beyond."

He added,

I often wonder why people should want to live forever. . . . What would it be like . . . [to] be resurrected and have bodies of 'flesh and bone'? That would mean that there would be no eating or drinking or sex. These are the

major pleasures we know in this life. Such bodies apparently would need no sleep, no rest, no recreation.

There would be no need for plumbing, no bathing, no sewage. . . . What about other occupations? What would you like to do FOREVER? . . . Would Shakespeare continue to write plays FOREVER? Could Beethoven continue to write symphonies FOREVER? What about those of us on earth who are engaged in occupations that can no longer exist in the hereafter? The farmers, the sheep men, the restaurant people, the laundrymen, the cooks, bakers, stock brokers, merchants, . . . and so on indefinitely.

If one tries to project oneself into this sort of picture, it looks as if it would be a magnificent bore."

Soon after Lowry left the Y several other faculty members, who had been criticized for "liberal" or unorthodox teaching, left for greener pastures. Geologist Murray Hales was employed by the government at Washington, D.C. Botanist Walter Cottom (who once complimented me for telling truth in my *Y News* column) went to the University of Utah. Hugh Woodward, who taught philosophy, joined the federal Works Progress Administration education program. Ott Romney (who also enjoyed my column) coached basketball, football, and track; he became athletic director at West Virginia University. Grant Ivins, who taught animal husbandry, became price administrator for Utah during World War II.

For a period of twenty-one years Lowry Nelson was professor of sociology at the University of Minnesota, meanwhile accepting assignments for government research and other studies—a list of accomplishments which fills five pages of the "Autobiographical Sketch" in *Deseret Ride* (1983). He wrote eight books and a long list of monographs, articles, and bulletins.

He never forgot his origins. "I believe I was the first Mormon to protest the church policy with regard to blacks in a letter to the First Presidency of the church in 1947," he recalled. "In May 1952, I published in the *Nation* magazine an article on 'Mormons and the Negro.' This was the first [time] the non-Mormon world knew of this policy, and it was widely publicized throughout the Negro press."

Lowry and I corresponded over the years, trading tidbits, opinions, curious and outlandish items. I sent a clipping about a woman who sued the hospital because after a throat operation she was no longer able to give her husband oral sex. "This whole thing is in bad taste," I commented, "and you can take that both ways."

Lowry replied that the case was "out of this world. I sent a copy to Don Martindale," who was a fellow faculty member at the University of Minnesota, professor of sociology, author of books on social science, and with hobby of writing satirical verse. I don't know if he wrote anything about that case, but he did when my former friend Sonia Johnson was excommu-

nicated for her activities in behalf of Mormons for ERA, the charge being that her "campaigning for the Equal Rights Amendment is harmful to the church," an AP story reported on 19 November 1979. Sonia appealed the verdict, but in rejecting her appeal stake president Earl J. Roueche of Sterling, Virginia, said, "We still find signs of apostasy and an unwillingness to arrest the criticism of church doctrine and leadership."

Don Martindale wrote:

"Signs of apostasy, Sonia, my dear,"
The head of the stake was quite grim.
"Are plain as the nose on your face, I fear;
You live in defiance and sin.

"You knew that you could disagree all you please
So long as you hid it away.
But you, like a mare with her nose to the breeze,
Would lead our good woman away.

"We met to discuss how to stop ERA
In the City of Saints—what a pity—
You hired a plane to our shock and dismay
And bannered it over the city.

"And then in the spirit of true Christian love
In gentleness we cut you off.
But you called in the press and, Heavens Above!
At hierarchy you did scoff.

"Repent now, Dear Sonia, lest you cause a riot,
And listen to what must be said.
Our girls should be home giving us peace and quiet,
In living room, kitchen, and bed."

I had written Lowry that

the charges against Sonia Johnson are political, not doctrinal—she is being told how to vote. However, this is nothing new. During Brigham Young's time there was the numbered ballot. Later, Apostle Moses Thatcher was disfellowshipped for insisting on personal political independence. And today the Church has taken a political stand on ERA.

As a member of the Relief Society, my wife was given a petition to circulate in the neighborhood to get signatures for a state anti-pornography bill; and again received a petition on an attempted repeal of the California law legalizing sex acts between consenting adults. When a California attor-

ney phoned Salt Lake with a warning that political activity could result in the taxation of church property, Salt Lake withdrew from such campaigns—but here it is again with ERA.

Lowry replied, "Re: Sonia, a lot of people were 'hit hard.' Your angle that the action of the church was based on her holding unauthorized church meetings had not occurred to me. Has she been opening and closing meetings with prayer? Well, they can cut her off, but they can't cut her down."

Lowry sent me *The Prayer of a Modern Pharisee* from *The Presbyterian Outlook* in 1974. It's a paraphrase of Jesus' parable by John A. Maclean.

I thank thee, Lord, that I am a North Carolinian and not from Virginia, . . . and I thank thee, Lord, that I am an *Eastern* North Carolina. . . . Especially, Lord, I thank thee that I am a Southerner and not a Yankee—for there are many things one might endure, but not that! Grateful I am, O Lord, that I am a North American and not a South American . . . and that I was born in these favored United States and not among the gringos of Mexico or the Canucks of Canada. Thankful, too, I am, to be an occidental and not an oriental. . . . I thank thee Lord, that I am a Gentile and not a Jew. Yes, of course, Jesus was a Jew and many others of that race were princes of Israel when my ancestors were Nordic barbarians, but that was a long time ago. . . . I thank thee that I am white, not yellow or red or brown or black. . . .

I thank thee, O Lord, that I am a Protestant and not a Catholic. . . . I thank thee that I am a Presbyterian, and not . . . "high hat" like the Episcopalians, nor yet . . . provincial or narrow as the Baptists or Methodists. . . . I thank thee, Lord, that I am a Southern Presbyterian, yes, an Eastern-North Carolina, North American, occidental, Scotch, Gentile, white, civilized, Protestant Southern Presbyterian! What a man!

At age eighty Lowry retired, returning to Provo to keep his hand in with his favorite hobby, needling church authorities and commenting on the culture behind the Zion Curtain. A section of *Last Judgment* deals with "My Dissidence," which is quite a list. He objected to the church welfare system. "Large areas of good farm land have been acquired . . . and these farms are serviced mainly by volunteer labor." As to "Financial Secrecy," he said, "There may be no other indigenous American movement that refuses to make financial reports to its members." He claimed that "Aggressive Proselyting" was "fueled by the expectation of the Second Coming of Christ and the Mormon conviction that they are the 'reception committee.'"

The gadfly lived a charmed life as a persistent dissident, possibly because of his age, his eminence, and the fact that he'd known many of the Brethren personally for years.

He delighted in tearing apart the talk by Elder Ezra Taft Benson delivered to LDS teachers of religion on 17 September 1976 regarding the

correct way of writing about church subjects. Elder Benson recommended a study of the book *Wilford Woodruff* by Matthias F. Cowley and J. M. Tanner (published 1909, reprinted by Bookcraft 1964), which would “demonstrate how one teaches facts and draws great lessons of faith therefrom.”

Lowry hooted, pointing out that on 10 February 1934 Anthony W. Ivins of the First Presidency had repudiated *Wilford Woodruff* and its authors in the strongest terms, yet thirty years later Bookcraft could reissue the book as a model for obedient LDS authors to emulate. Just goes to show that progress is eternal, I suppose.

Don Martindale took up the refrain:

Ezra Taft Benson, old son of the sod,
Is destined to sit on the right hand of God,
As soon as that seat, be it soon or belated,
By old Spencer Kimball is finally vacated.

An end will be put to all trouble and strife;
He will speak for the Lord for the rest of his life.
Whenever he wiggles or waggles his jaw
The words from his lips will have force of the law.

The Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price,
The great Book of Mormon are all very nice,
The Bible has points, but Brother, come off it,
Not one can compare with the fresh word from a prophet.

The final paragraph of Lowry's *Last Judgment* was, according to Martindale, “pure poetry of the highest type—a pure lyric of joy and love.” He put Lowry's words in poetic form:

The Word of God
is in the stars;
constellations, galaxies, and suns.

It is in the earth's crust;
in myriad form of life
including mankind.

The Word
will continue to be revealed
by the crowning achievement of creation,
that miraculous instrument,
the human brain.

Two short poems reflect Lowry Nelson's philosophy at his ninetieth birthday, 16 April 1983:

Now in the amber years of lengthy life—
Labors arrested by infirmity—
He dwells in memories of the early strife,
And waits his exit to eternity.

What is Heaven, or where,
Nobody seems to care;
For it exists as part
Of every human heart.