

NOTES AND COMMENTS

An Hour in the Grove

MARY L. BRADFORD

I HAVE VISITED this spot before—in my youth, in art, in my thoughts—so often that it has become cliché. The grove, a ripe symbol extending back through time and myth, has become too ripe in my mind and has fallen. Scholarly papers about the various versions of the First Vision, not-so-scholarly reproductions of the experience in brochures and in visitors centers had combined to render it hazy, fading in importance as charisma changes to bureaucracy.

I am expecting, therefore, only a pleasant hour in the woods. But as soon as I walk up the path, my mood changes. By the time I am seated on a bench facing a lectern, a piano, two giant tympani (which somehow don't seem out of place), I am borne back again to childhood where the words "sacred grove" were sacred in themselves, denoting expectancy and wonder.

I am surrounded now with friends, even with family. My brother and his wife are seated across from me, my husband at my side. Old friends from college—like Doug Alder and Cherry Silver, colleagues from the *Dialogue* staff, *Exponent II*, *Sunstone* and *BYU Studies*; friends from the RLDS Church warmly made in Lamoni at last year's Mormon History Association meeting; Leonard and Grace Arrington, who have practically adopted me into their family. In fact, all the folks from the Mormon History Association, who have brought both churches together in a way nobody else has been able to do. This year's president, Jan Shipps, not a Mormon herself, has succeeded in putting on the finest Sesquicentennial celebration of the year, a festival of research, information, discussion and friendship. This meeting in the grove crowns the three day conference in Canandaigua, New York.

I see Crawford Gates, idolized in my youth by all the young women of the MIA who were taught to sing in giant all-church choruses under his vital baton, looking not one whit older, thank goodness, and his wife Georgia at the piano, readying themselves to lead a chorus pulled together in three days from members of the MHA and a nearby ward. They will sing a work commissioned by the MHA for the occasion, a work based on the Wentworth Letter. I am amazed that a composer could create perfect musical images just because he was asked.

There are short talks by Richard Bushman of the LDS Church and Alma Blair of the RLDS Church, both historians. Richard's personal sensitivity to the life of Joseph Smith derives from his studies of the prophet's life and from his own diffident personality. He reminds us that Joseph's message reached the individual through a transcendent force available to all. Alma Blair's message is so warm and moving that most of us cannot keep from crying. Eternity is with us now, and Joseph Smith found God in his everyday life. Joseph's message and God's message is, "You are loved. You are forgiven. You may become what in your deepest heart you would become."

Paul Dredge from Boston, an anthropologist and musician, leads the choir in a new arrangement of that old hymn, "Joseph Smith's First Prayer." I have always thought the music in the hymnbook inappropriate to the theme. In Paul's arrangement, using the music of Russian composer Kabelevsky's *War Requiem*, the words finally meet their match.

And then a reading of the First Vision, in which all versions come together in the person of James Arrington. For a few minutes James becomes the young prophet in open-necked shirt, his hair combed slightly forward. He begins haltingly, gaining in power, subtly transforming the farm boy to the prophet.

At first I am bothered. I think, why didn't James memorize and act the part, as he does in his Brother Brigham one-man show? Soon I realize that this scholarly interpretation, done simply, without show, much as Joseph himself might have read it, is appropriate. His reading suggests the elusive and the mystical while presenting us with a palpable living presence. At the end, when he lifts his arms and cries, "He Lives!" I truly believe it. It is an androgynous moment in which the political chafings of recent months disappear, intellectual and scholarly pursuits meld with heart and spirit. I think, for some reason, of a friend who recently tried to explain to me why he had left the church of his childhood for another: "I must worship in my mind!" he said passionately. In this place, the passions of the mind are easily joined to the peace of worship.

Both prayers, opening and closing, seem designed to unite disparate elements and melt barriers. Paul Edwards, Vice-President of Lamoni College and a direct descendant of the Prophet and Douglas Alder, a historian from Utah State both invoke the Spirit of belonging and becoming.

Here are the words spoken in the grove on May 4, 1980.

SUNDAY MORNING

- 7:30 a.m. Chorus members depart for Sacred Grove
Front Lobby
- 8:00 a.m. General departure for Sacred Grove Front Lobby
- 8:30 a.m. GATHERING IN THE SACRED GROVE
- “Praise to the Man” by William W. Phelps
Opening Prayer Paul M. Edwards
- “Thoughts on the Mission of the Prophet Joseph Smith”
Richard L. Bushman
- “Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning” Adapted from Kabelevsky’s
War Requiem
- Choral group made up of MHA members and LDS Fairport
Ward Chorus Arranged and conducted by C. Paul Dredge
- “Thoughts on the Mission of the Prophet Joseph Smith”
Alma Blair
- Reading James Arrington
- “Prologue on Prophecy” Crawford Gates
- Sesquicentennial hymn commissioned by the
Mormon History Association
- CHORUS
- Rochester Brass Quintet
Bryan Stotez, Tympanist
Roy Samuelsen, Baritone
- Closing Prayer Douglas D. Alder
- In the event of inclement weather, this gathering will be held at
the Chapel adjacent to the Visitor’s Center at the Peter Whitmer
Farm in Waterloo, New York
- 9:30 a.m. CONTINENTAL BREAKFAST Hill Cumorah
Visitor’s Center Grounds

PAUL EDWARDS: Our redeeming Lord, seeking a semblance of our personal restoration, we come to this place made sacred in our ordinances. Young Joseph sought this world in his confusion. He came to ask what he could do; he came to talk in humility to the source of his devotions. We, Lord, represent a part of what he found and what he did; and in the silent temples of our souls, we stand in Joseph's place asking as did he—understanding, not to leave here confusion—new light, not vain repetition of old ways—wisdom, not reinforcement of convenient conviction—patience, not the safety of conformity—and true faith, not the promise of victory. We have shared these days in the roots of our fellowship, and we have experienced again the warmth of belonging. We have lived in the shadows of our beginnings and the assurances of our immediate concerns. Now, pausing in our long day of enjoyment and fulfillment, we wish to express our appreciation for the abundance of our lives; and like Joseph, lacking wisdom, we invoke thy spirit to be with us, to grant us courage that we might be fully alive; strength that we might love mercy, practice kindness, and walk humbly with our God; and love that we might be loving people. Bless those of us who come to praise thee in thy Name. Amen.

RICHARD L. BUSHMAN: One hundred and fifty years is a safe distance for looking at Joseph Smith. We have in the past few days reached new levels of understanding as students of early Mormonism, but coming to this grove we can imagine more clearly what it would be like to meet Joseph Smith in person. We would I think be impressed by the presence that overawed so many visitors, and despite our habit of objectivity, perhaps even entranced.

Moreover, we might be offended. It is the nature of prophets that they run against the grain. They stand to some extent outside their culture. Perhaps now, even more than then, it would be hard for us to embrace him without reservations. Gordon Wood suggested yesterday that there were but a few years in our history when the Book of Mormon could have taken root in America. If we think how few today take seriously any revelation, not to mention the inspirations of New York farm boys, we can imagine the difficulty of the restoration occurring now. It seems impossible for this generation to accept anything beyond what we can see and hear or to think that intelligence from invisible spheres can guide us as it did Joseph Smith. Even for the Latter-day Saints few things are more difficult to accept than the Urim and Thummim. When Joseph came back from the hill Cumorah, he met his mother in the log cabin not far from here and handed her two "diamond-shaped stones," as she said, and told her, "See, Mother, I have a key." How hard it is even for us who are believers to think that through those stones messages came from Heaven. At these points the Prophet runs up against the strongest barriers in our culture. So many of the influences that shape us as we grow forbid us from believing in revelation.

One of the great achievements of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century was to rid the world of superstition. It questioned all assumptions, all propositions about human life that were not verified by the senses—the

common senses that we all share. It was the Enlightenment's task to banish witches and elves and a hundred other concoctions that had entertained and terrified the human spirit for centuries. But the price paid for that powerful act of cleansing was to debilitate the capacity of educated people to believe in divine messages. Even within our church we pause suspiciously when someone says, "I've had a vision." Warning signals go up, we say nothing, we wonder about psychological stability. Or consider how lethargic we are in the pursuit of everyday, moment-to-moment inspiration, almost as if we did not believe we could have intelligence beyond our own.

I do not wish to discredit the Enlightenment for its achievement in ridding the world of superstition. It may only have gone too far. We seem now to be too confined to the earth, as if we could know for certain that there was nothing else. Certainly the yearning for supernatural contact, for heavenly friendship has not been crushed. Think of the common reaction to the climactic scene of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, or the fascination with the memorable words of Ben Kenobi in *Star Wars*: "May the Force be with you." What do we desire more strongly than the presence of the Force? And yet we draw back from faith and commitment.

I do not recommend this morning renewed faith in the Prophet Joseph Smith, although we would all be better for that. I urge rather a renewed belief in ourselves and in the human potentials which our culture has diminished. I ask that we allow the Prophet's words to remind us of what we can be and do. He said that a person may profit by noticing the first indication of the spirit of revelation—"when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you"—and thus grow in the principle of revelation.

We have in our scholarly way examined Joseph Smith these past few days. If we are willing also to confront him as a person, not merely as a subject of study, we may learn still more. We may in time outgrow the limitations of our time and place, and realize more fully the possibilities of our natures, which it is, after all, the primary task of a prophet to help us achieve. I ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

ALMA BLAIR: When some months ago I was asked to participate in this service, I did a foolish thing—I leaped at the chance! It is an awesome thing to stand in the place, or near the place where sacred things happened, where a light shone so strongly that the place was transformed, where heaven and earth came together in a way which transformed not only others but us as well. I cannot speak of Joseph's mission as if it were some abstract historical problem to be solved, as though it were a lecture in which I could state that Joseph did this and did that. I hope the historical experience informs my thought, but fundamentally this is a moment of personal reflection, a moment of testimony—mine and yours.

Nor can I speak of his mission apart from others who have likewise been touched throughout the history of mankind by God's saving grace and love, others who have shared the mission, others who have lived and sometimes died in carrying out that mission. We must not forget the threads which reach

across time and tradition holding together God's intention for all his children. I would also suggest that while "mission" implies a sender, it implies also those who are sent, those who receive the mission and those who help to understand it and follow it. As we interpret the mission, even as did Joseph, our understanding grows and changes as we grow and change. Let us not be hasty in assuming that we now fully understand him, his mission or our mission. What was spoken, and what happened here, were rather simple things. A young man came to a grove. There was no church. There was no doctrine. There were no songs to be sung, except perhaps those sung by the angels.

While understanding all that we may feel we understand, nevertheless, I say it with my own understanding; I pray you will think it in your own understanding. Though there are differences in experience and tradition that may separate us, I think that fundamentally we all can go back.

Joseph's mission was to teach me, to teach you, to teach us that heaven and earth, eternity and time, are inseparably bound together. A few years ago a close friend of mine was dying of cancer. I had been dating her off and on. One day she happily explained to me how on that day she had finally learned to sing the tone of A, something very difficult for her to do. My first reaction was "You're going to die! Of what value is it! It will be lost!" Then I had second thoughts. "What happens after death?" And I realized that my faith saw the linkage. She sang a year or so after that. She sang not just in heaven—she sang here! Heaven and earth are bound together. We live in pain. We live in joy. Is there any less eternity here than there will be, or there has been? We are linked together in time with all that has been and all that will be; but it is "now" and Joseph is "now," not just for the past or future. He saw God in his everyday life.

I think that Joseph's mission was to teach us that we are loved and forgiven; we are free to become more than we are. When one reads the first account we have of the first vision, I think it is very clear that he came to the woods seeking not to start a church but to find his soul's salvation. The vision grew out of the anguish that he had of not knowing what it was that he could be, or whether he could be anything. I have felt that anguish, too. I have sensed in myself the inadequacies that are mine as a human being. I have sensed in myself that understanding of my sinfulness, of my incompleteness, of my unwillingness to follow; and so I am torn as I think he was torn, to ask of God: "What will you do for me, or am I lost forever?" And the answer which has come to me, and the answer which he found and which has informed me was, "You are loved. You are forgiven. You may become what in your deepest heart you would become."

And finally he teaches us to love each other as Christ loved us—loving us as we are, imperfect, incomplete, sinful, hopeful and as we may become. Something reaches across the barriers we set up between ourselves even as we look back at our common traditions. I felt it in the halls as we discussed things. I felt the handshakes. I felt the love which came from you and from me back to you. I think that we misunderstand those statements in Joseph's

account which talk about not joining any of the churches because their creeds are an abomination. I think that we sometimes make them into a barrier as a matter of pride. I think what was being said was that none of us are to make barriers. While we must live within our understandings and be true to them, there is a deeper call when God says, "I will break down your barriers. I will change your understandings. I will teach you that I love you, no matter who you are or who you understand me to be, for I am greater than all of the imaginings you could have of me." I think Joseph must have been overwhelmed, for he touched the source of love of all mankind and he heard the Son of God speak to him of love and of a future.

JAMES ARRINGTON: I was born in the town of Sharon in the State of Vermont North America on the twenty third day of December A.D. 1805 of goodly parents who spared no pains to instructing me in the Christian religion. At the age of about ten years my father, Joseph Smith, Senior, moved to Palmyra, Ontario County, in the State of New York and being in indigent circumstances was obliged to labor hard for the support of a large family, having nine children. It required the exertions of all that were able to render any assistance for the support of the family. My father was a farmer and taught me the art of husbandry. We were deprived of the benefit of an education; suffice it to say I was merely instructed in reading, writing and the ground rules of arithmetic, which constituted my whole literary acquirements.

At about the age of twelve years my mind became seriously impressed with regard to the all-important concerns for the welfare of my immortal soul which led me to searching the scriptures believing, as I was taught, that they contained the word of God. Thus, applying myself to them and my intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations led me to marvel exceedingly, for I discovered that they did not adorn their profession by a holy walk and godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that sacred depository. This was a grief to my soul. Thus, from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart concerning the situation of the world of mankind, the contentions and divisions, the wickedness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind. My mind became exceedingly distressed for I became convicted of my sins. Looking at the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong, but considered it of the first importance to me that I should be right, in matters of so much moment—matters involving eternal consequences.

I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world for I learned in the scriptures that God was the same yesterday, today, and forever; that he was no respecter of persons for he was God. For I looked upon the sun, the glorious luminary of the earth, and also the moon rolling in her majesty and in the strength of beauty, and man, with power and intelligence in governing the things which are so exceeding great and marvelous even in the likeness of Him who created them and when I considered upon these things my heart exclaimed "Well hath the wise man said it is a fool that saith in his heart there

is no God." My heart exclaimed "all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent and omnipresent power—a being who maketh laws and decreeth and bindeth all things in their bounds who filleth eternity who was and is and will be from all eternity to eternity." And when I considered all these things, I began to reflect upon the importance of being prepared for a future state, and upon inquiring [about] the plan of salvation. I found that there was a great clash in religious sentiment; for, there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country. Indeed, the whole district seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people, some crying, "Lo, here!" and others, "Lo, there!" Some were contending for the Methodist faith, some for the Presbyterian, and some for the Baptist.

I was at this time in my fifteenth year. My father's family was proselyted to the Presbyterian faith, and four of them joined that church, namely, my mother, Lucy; my brothers Hyrum and Samuel Harrison; and my sister Sophronia.

During this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness; for, notwithstanding the great love which the converts to these different faiths expressed at the time of their conversion, and the great zeal manifested by the respective clergy, who were active in getting up and promoting this extraordinary scene of religious feeling, in order to have everybody converted, as they were pleased to call it, let them join what sect they pleased; yet when the converts began to file off, some to one party and some to another, it was seen that the seemingly good feelings of both the priests and the converts were more pretended than real; for a scene of great confusion and bad feeling ensued—priest contending against priest, and convert against convert; so that all their good feelings one for another, if they ever had any, were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest about opinions.

If I went to one society they referred me to one plan, and another to another; each one pointing to his own particular creed as the *summum bonum* of perfection. Considering that all could not be right, and that God could not be the author of so much confusion, I determined to investigate the subject more fully, believing that if God had a Church it would not be split up into factions, and that if He taught one society to worship one way, and administer in one set of ordinances, He would not teach another principles which were diametrically opposed.

But though my feelings were deep and often poignant, still I kept myself aloof from all these parties, though I attended their several meetings as often as occasion would permit. In process of time my mind became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect, and I felt some desire to be united with them; but so great were the confusion and strife among the different denominations, that it was impossible for a person young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong.

My mind at times was greatly excited, the cry and tumult were so great and incessant. The Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and Methodists, and used all the powers of both reason and sophistry to prove their errors, or, at least, to make the people think they were in error.

In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?

While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads: *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.*

Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if *any* person needed wisdom from God, I did; for how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know; for the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible.

At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God. I at length came to the determination to "ask of God," concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom, and would give liberally, and not upbraid, I might venture.

Information was what I most desired at this time, and with a fixed determination to obtain it, I retired to the woods to make the attempt. It was on the morning of a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty. It was the first time in my life that I had made such an attempt, for amidst all my anxieties I had never as yet made the attempt to pray vocally.

Having looked around me, and finding myself alone, I kneeled down. I made a fruitless attempt to pray. My tongue seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter. I heard a noise behind me like someone walking towards me. I strove again to pray, but could not; the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer. I sprang upon my feet and looked around, but saw no person, or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking.

I kneeled again, I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction.

Exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction—not to an imaginary ruin, but to the power of some actual being from the unseen world, who had such marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being—just

at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me, and filled me with unspeakable joy.

It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. My mind was taken away from the objects with which I was surrounded, and I was enraptured in a heavenly vision. A personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame, which was spread all around and yet nothing consumed. Another personage soon appeared like unto the first: two glorious personages, who exactly resembled each other in features and likeness, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*

I saw the Lord, and he spake unto me saying "Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven thee. Go thy way—walk in my statutes and keep my commandments. Behold I am the Lord of glory. I was crucified for the world that all those who believe on my name may have Eternal life."

No sooner did I get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak, than I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right—and which I should join. Said he, "The world lieth in sin at this time and none doeth good, no not one. They have turned aside from the Gospel and keep not my commandments. They draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me and mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them according to this ungodliness and to bring to pass that which hath been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and Apostles. Behold and lo, I come quickly as is written of me, in the cloud, clothed in the glory of my Father." And my soul was filled with love.

I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; at the same time receiving a promise that the fullness of the Gospel should at some future time be made known unto me, and many other things did he say unto me, which I cannot write at this time. When I came to myself again, I found myself lying on my back, looking up into heaven. When the light had departed, I had no strength; but soon recovering in some degree, I went home.

I have thought since, that I felt much like Paul, when he made his defense before King Agrippa, and related the account of the vision he had when he saw a light, and heard a voice; but still there were but few who believed him; some said he was dishonest, others said he was mad; and he was ridiculed and reviled. But all this did not destroy the reality of his vision. He had seen a vision, he knew he had, and all the persecution under heaven could not make it otherwise; and though they should persecute him unto death, yet he knew, and would know to his latest breath, that he had both seen a light and heard a voice speaking unto him, and all the world could not make him think or believe otherwise.

So it was with me. I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true.

It caused me serious reflection then, and often has since, how very strange it was that an obscure boy, of a little over fourteen years of age, and one, too, who was doomed to the necessity of obtaining a scanty maintenance by his daily labor, should be thought a character of sufficient importance to attract the attention of the great ones of the most popular sects of the day, and in a manner to create in them a spirit of the most bitter persecution and reviling. But strange or not, so it was.

I have actually seen a vision; I know it, and I know God knows it and I cannot deny it . . . and now after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which I give of him: That He lives!!! He LIVES!!!

CRAWFORD GATES: *Prologue*: "Joseph, Prophet, the Lord's anointed Spoke for Jesus in these latter days. God, through him, restored the Gospel; its power and truth will guide all our ways. Now prepare for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ our redeeming Lord, Heed the prophet; obey his precepts; sanctify our lives through God's word."



The *Prophecy* portion of the text comes from the Wentworth Letter by Joseph Smith: "No unhallowed hand can stop the work from progressing; Persecutions may rage, mobs may combine, armies may assemble, calumny may defame, But the truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly and independently, Till it has penetrated every continent, Till it has visited every clime, Swept every country, and sounded in every ear, Till the purposes of God shall be accomplished, and the great Jehovah shall say 'The work is done!'"

DOUGLAS D. ALDER: Our Father, we come before Thee in this sacred spot to express gratitude, many of us five generations since the events that occurred here. We mostly live in favor but we are aware of the struggles that began here and the sacrifices that flowed from here and have favored our lives. Many of us, Father, have the privilege of working and laboring with our minds but we are aware that many served with muscle and spirit.

We thank Thee, Father, for the Prophet, who, in this spot, sought Thee. But for more than past events we are grateful for Thy presence continuously. We are grateful for Thy intervention. We are grateful for the sacredness of Thy work and we know that that sacredness is available to all. We ask Thee to help us understand the simplicity as well as the complexities that our minds perceive. We are grateful, Father, that there is enough and more in Thy being to challenge us eternally. We pray Thee to help us that we may serve Thee, eternally. In the name of Thy son, Jesus Christ, Amen.