

Grandpa's Hat

Ron Madson

*Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything—
That's how the light gets in.*

—Leonard Cohen

When my father died in February of 2007, I inherited from him many of my grandfather's Church books—one published as far back as 1846. I knew my grandfather was a bibliophile—collecting, reading, and leaving his underlining and commentary throughout his books. While surveying these books, I unexpectedly found his missionary journal. I didn't know he had kept one, and his worn leather journal had entries for every single day of his mission from October of 1906 to October of 1908 in the Northern States Mission.

Grandpa's mission had been an inspiration for the Madson clan. His progeny knew by heart the story of Grandpa's hat. While serving his mission, he encountered a great deal of religious bigotry and persecution. He and a group of elders were holding an evening meeting in a barn with a single lightbulb. During the meeting, someone shot it out. Elder Madson got another lightbulb and, while trying to install it, he was shot in the head. He was immediately taken to a nearby hospital. Days passed. He was not getting better—in fact, was getting worse. His mission president came to the hospital to give him a blessing. The mission president through inspiration realized that the medical staff was giving Grandpa Madson poison. He was taken from the hospital and fully recovered. The story was further reinforced when the Madson family could produce the very bullet-holed hat that he was

wearing at the time. This faith-promoting story had left a mark on all of us.

My first impulse was to race through the pages and find this wonderful account. However, for some reason, I felt restrained as I held what I considered a sacred family text that had just been unearthed and made known to us. Feeling a duty to share it with the entire Madson tribe, I decided to immediately start typing each page until I had transcribed the entire record and then surprise them by sending copies to all my extended family as a Christmas gift. My grandfather had been born on December 23 so stories of Grandpa, Joseph Smith, and Jesus were all wrapped together at Madson Christmas parties.

I was reading only the pages that I transcribed and anxiously waiting for the miraculous story to unfold—more than enough motivation as I waded through endless days of Grandpa writing about the rain, rejection, and no noticeable success other than selling a Book of Mormon now and again. The transcribing of days, weeks, and months passed by quickly; and I waited with anticipation, believing that maybe it would be the next page that would reveal Grandpa's story.

Then I read and typed an account of him and his companion going to a home. The man came to the door, pointed a shotgun at them, and told them to get off his property. Then about two weeks later, he recorded that someone threw a rock at him, cutting open his head. He went to the hospital to have it dressed. Meanwhile, the mission president was also taken to the hospital because of an attack of appendicitis. They were both treated and recovered. Could it be?

I plowed forward, transcribing each day, now only guardedly optimistic that the story involving the bullet-ridden hat and the spiritual intervention would appear. Page after page, Grandpa Madson doggedly persisted in his missionary efforts. He defended polygamy (“All they ever want to talk about is polygamy.”) as best a young missionary could at that time. He defended Joseph Smith and Mormon history. He studied the gospel and read everything he could get his hands on. He went door to door and walked long distances from town to town with little purse and even less scrip. He became a battle-worn missionary who would

not give up no matter how often his message was rejected or misunderstood.

I came to the last few pages and finished the work—transcribing his exact words that he recorded every single day with spelling and grammatical errors left intact. I was pleased to have completed this gift for the Madsons, but I had a certain melancholy, realizing that the inspiring story involving Grandpa's hat was most likely a melding of the gun incident, his head being hit by a rock, and meeting the mission president at the hospital. It seems that, over the decades, all of us had, quite naturally, contributed to taking ordinary events and stitching them together to create an inspiring story. In my opinion, there was never any intentional fabrication but simply the fertile mix of human nature, religious expression, and time.

I called our family's genealogist/historian aunt to tell her the good news about having the missionary journal and that I had completely transcribed it. I told her that I needed all the email addresses of aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. She was really thrilled. Before sending it to her and others in cyberspace, I asked her about Grandpa's hat story. She enthusiastically confirmed the story.

I then told her that the story might very well be a patching together of a few events over a three-week period—and I explained to her why I believed that the hat story was most likely an embellishment. She went stone silent on the other end of the phone. Then suddenly she protested: "You're wrong. I know it happened. We have the hat with the hole in it." I knew better than to contend with such a noble and strong matriarch's testimony.

I thanked her for her assistance, and we talked family. Then after entering dozens of email addresses, I pushed "send." Now the only actual first-hand account of William Hyrum Madson is out there for anyone who wants to read the word-for-word daily record written by his very hand.

My grandfather returned from his mission, married Grandma, and fathered six children. Though he remained a man of small means, he created a large personal library consisting of all kinds of Church and secular histories and great literature. His written high council talks reflected his love of learning and desire to know the truth. My father, his oldest son, told me that Grandpa was always searching to know everything he could about his and

his family's faith and heritage, that he believed that "Mormonism is truth and truth is Mormonism," that "in Mormonism we are only required to believe that which is true," and that if something is true, then we embrace it and if not, then we discard it. My father inherited his father's beliefs and books and now they are in my possession.

My home is a home where books and questions are welcomed. And now, everyday people and historians are pushing the "send" button, making available previously "hidden" books, journals, and original histories and documents that have been shelved and, prior to the internet, accessible to only a few. Once being habituated to wanting to "know things," it is only natural to fire up the search engine, but I have found that, by accepting these offerings, one makes a Faustian bargain; and there is no going back.

I sometimes envy those who manage to have their hats, stories, and testimonies intact, untouchable by new "facts." There is so much comfort, peace, and inspiration in Grandpa's hat story. My first and most immature impulse has been and still is to make sure that everyone knows, as I have discovered, the "real story"; but with the passing of time, I now believe that the real miracle is not to be found in what may or may not be the completely authentic stories in his life or those we tell each other, but in recognizing the legacy of my grandfather's virtue, goodness, and fidelity to faith and family, not only during his mission but throughout his life—without which the power and influence of the stories we have shared or will share lose their meaning.

But it is my lot to have inherited from my grandfather the journal and not the hat. I also inherited his belief that the truth is the "fairest gem that the riches of worlds can produce"¹ and that in the end it will prevail. What I consider the real story is now in cyberspace, so if any family member cares enough to actually read Grandpa's diary, then they can draw their own conclusions without my assistance.

Soon enough in this age of information where the simplest "internet ploughboy" has original sources at his disposal, some, if not many, of the myths and stories that we tell each other in family settings, community, church, and national tribes will continue to be eroded or totally lost—whether we like it or not. Because the power of myths (real or not) is essential to all families, communi-

ties, and nations, some, or perhaps many, may understandably want to protest any new information, call it a lie, and demand allegiance to a certain story/myth while others will insist that it be given up. Patience, listening ears, and wisdom will be needed. However, recriminations back and forth may be part of the inevitable transition. Something must die so that something new and better can take its place.

I believe we will, in time, grow into a much more mature, nuanced, and profound faith—less tribal, more inclusive, and far less dependent on sensational, unsupportable claims that we might feel compelled to spend our whole life's mission defending despite the evidence. Grandpa's hat has a hole in it? So do many stories we tell each other, but we should appreciate the holes in our individual and collective hats—for that is how the light gets in.

Note

1. John Jaques, "Oh Say, What Is Truth?" *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 272.