

# LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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## Words, Words, Words

All his life, the Prophet Joseph Smith lamented his lack of formal education, writing in his earliest history that he “was merely instructed in reading, writing, and the ground rules of arithmetic, which constituted my whole literary acquirements.”<sup>1</sup> Forever afterward, he savored every opportunity to enhance his learning and expand his mind. He toiled joyfully to learn Hebrew in Kirtland and German in Nauvoo. He never felt that fatigue or busyness, to say nothing of his seeric gifts, excused him from the divine injunction to seek learning (see D&C 88:118). “Returned home much fatigued [after] riding in the rain,” he noted in one journal entry. Then: “Spent the remainder of the day in reading and meditation.”<sup>2</sup> A few weeks later, he dictated: “Spent this [day] in endeavoring to treasure up knowledge for the benefit of my calling.”<sup>3</sup>

Joseph urged the Saints to do likewise. “I want every man to get knowledge,” he said, “search the law of nations, and get all the information they can. . . . Every man ought to study geography, governments, and languages, so that he may be able to go forth to any nation and before any multitude with eloquence.”<sup>4</sup>

Joseph himself was, in my view, supremely eloquent. And yet he chafed at the limits of language and repined over his linguistic shortcomings. To Emma he bemoaned his “inability in conveying my ideas in writing.”<sup>5</sup> To William W. Phelps he grieved, “I sit down to dictate . . . but cannot write my feelings, neither can tongue or language paint them to you.”<sup>6</sup> “O Lord,” he prayed, “deliver us in thy due time from the little narrow prison—almost, as it were, total darkness—of paper, pen, and ink, and a crooked, broken, and imperfect language.”<sup>7</sup>

Throughout Joseph’s ministry, the Lord frequently granted this plea for deliverance. Joseph’s revelations, translations, and teachings pulsate with supple, forceful, rhythmic, balanced, lucid, and lyrical prose. Consider just two examples, one from the revelations and one from Joseph’s own history.

1. “The earth rolls upon her wings, and the sun giveth his light by day, and the moon giveth her light by night, and the stars also give their light, as they roll upon their wings in their glory, in the midst of the power of God” (D&C 88:45).

2. “Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. . . . [F]or how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know . . . 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” (JS-H 1:12-13).

One of Joseph’s inspired translations records that, in the first generation of humanity, “it was given unto as many as called upon God to write by the spirit of inspiration” (Moses 6:5).

I have long been stirred by this verse, and I wonder whether, in some measure, we might claim its promise on this campus. Might we not all “call upon God” for the power to communicate—in writing and through other media—“by the spirit of inspiration”? Given all that our theology proclaims about the sacredness of language and the power of the written word, could we not do more to improve our own writing, as well as that of our students? Although not all of us are in disciplines where we naturally think of ourselves as writers, we all need to communicate more

effectively—with clarity, conviction, and persuasive power. This, I believe, is part of “speak[ing] with authority and excellence . . . in the language of scholarship.”<sup>8</sup> It is part of wielding righteous influence “by persuasion” (D&C 121:41).

The inexorable advance of generative AI makes all of this, in my view, all the more imperative.<sup>9</sup> Writing is, at its finest, a transcript of the human soul—a medium by which one soul connects with another. Cognitively and spiritually, writing does for us something that nothing else can. We simply cannot afford to forfeit its blessings by outsourcing it to ersatz algorithmic imitations.

Thirty-two years ago, Elder Neal A. Maxwell said at our annual university conference: “My

expectations for this institution continue to include not only teaching ‘out of the best books,’ but also having its faculty and graduates *write* some of the best books!”<sup>10</sup>

Whatever your summer writing or other creative projects, I pray that the spirit of inspiration will attend and amplify your work. May we experience on this campus at least a partial fulfillment of the promise found in the *Lectures on Faith*: “It is by words . . . [that] every being works when he works by faith . . . Faith . . . works by words; and with [words] its mightiest works have been, and will be, performed.”<sup>11</sup>

May some of those mighty works unfurl on this campus.

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<sup>1</sup> History, circa summer 1832, *Joseph Smith Papers: Documents*, Volume 2:280.

<sup>2</sup> Journal, 5 October 1835.

<sup>3</sup> Journal, 21 December 1835, *Joseph Smith Papers: Journals*, Volume 1:135.

<sup>4</sup> Discourse, 11 April 1844-A, JSP-D14:372-373.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Emma Smith, 6 June 1832, JSP-D2:256.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to William W. Phelps, 31 July 1832, JSP-D2:261.

<sup>7</sup> Letter to William W. Phelps, 27 November 1832, JSP-D2:320.

<sup>8</sup> Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” in John S. Tanner (ed), *Envisioning BYU—Volume 1: Foundations and Dreams* (2022) 46.

<sup>9</sup> President Reese recently charged our academic leaders, echoing Elder Bednar, that all use of AI on this campus should be agency-enhancing rather than agency-reducing.

<sup>10</sup> Neal A. Maxwell, “Out of the Best Faculty,” BYU Annual University Conference, August 26, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> *Lectures on Faith* (1835), Lecture 7, paragraph 3.