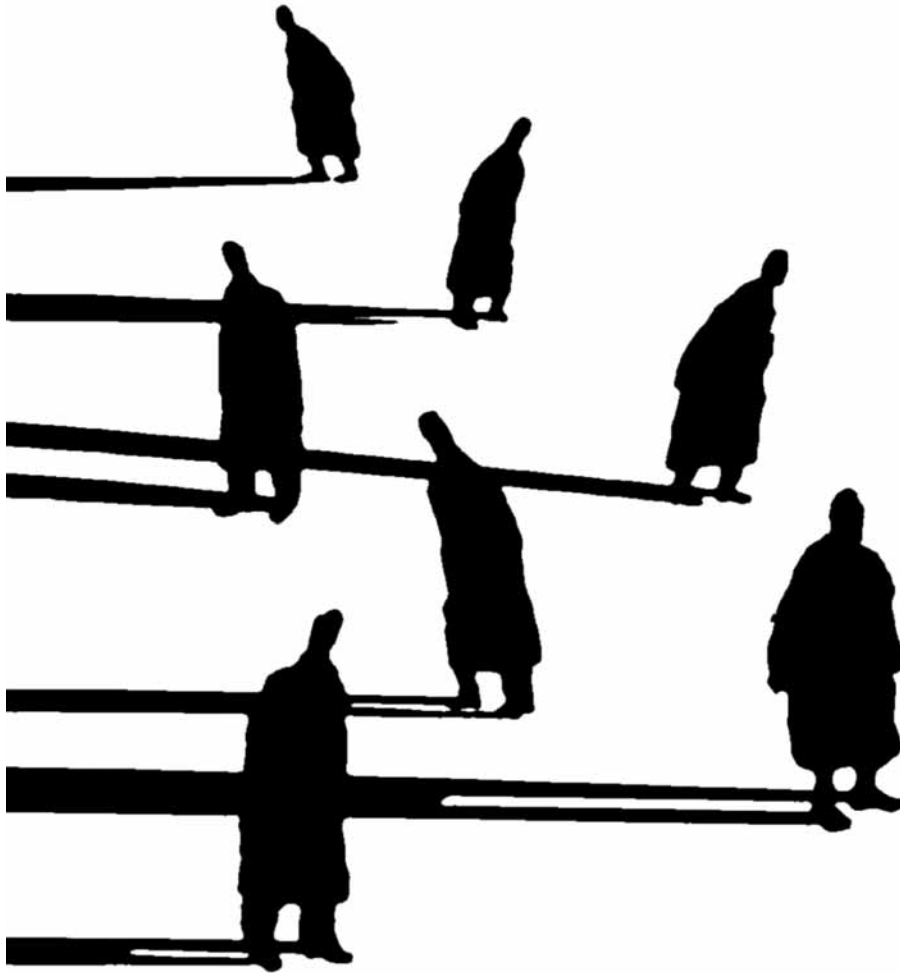


FROM THE PULPIT

A TRUE AND LIVING CHURCH

By Brian Chapman



THE ANCIENT GREEKS were fascinated with mathematics, and the Pythagoreans in particular were enthralled with number. The mystical Pythagoras said, "All is number." By number, he meant the positive integers and the rational numbers that could be formed from them. A legend exists regarding the discovery of irrational numbers—numbers such as π or the square root of two, which cannot be expressed as the ratio of two integers. It is said that this discovery was made by a young

sailor during a voyage. His fellow sailors were so disturbed by the philosophical implications that they killed him by throwing him overboard to suppress his knowledge.¹

While this story hardly seems credible, we are all at risk of constructing personal philosophies that are not quite built upon truth. When the errors of our foundations are exposed, we may respond with frightful violence, as the Greek sailors did. We can easily build up a personal "testimony" based on false premises about what the restored

Church is or how God interacts with us. Just as many Pythagoreans lived and died content in their belief that all was integers, so we may live lives where our false expectations of the Church are never challenged. But this is not likely. When error is exposed, it is testimony-shattering for many—because we have the habit, as Elder John Widtsoe warned, to reject the whole when only a part is found to be false.²

Elder B. H. Roberts wrote of the need for the Saints to be a people who expected adult answers to adult questions.³ Becoming Saints who are comfortable with hearing adult questions is very challenging. Becoming Saints who can answer adult questions is even more challenging. I won't pretend that I have arrived at such adult sainthood. But I believe that I have been journeying toward it for a while and along my journey have found some principles that have been invaluable. My objective today is to share with you some of these principles in the hope that they might make your journey smoother than it might otherwise be.

In Doctrine and Covenants Section 1, we read the Lord's declaration that this church is "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth." I will address three important topics related to this declaration:

1. We are not God's sole agents.
2. We are not always inspiring or inspired.
3. We are collectively responsible for making the Church true and living.

The first two topics address conclusions that are not supported by the declaration. The third addresses our responsibility in regards to the declaration.

We Are Not God's Sole Agents

RECENTLY, while I was driving a sister whom I home-teach to church, we passed the East Liberty Presbyterian Church. She commented that there was a very nice food bank and daily free lunch service run through that church. "With such great need here in Pittsburgh, it's great that there are so many good people willing to be helpful," I replied. She concurred.

When I related this story to my bishop, the man theoretically responsible for the welfare of everyone living within the Pittsburgh First Ward boundaries, his response was something like, "You can't believe how grateful I am that there are lots of helpful people in Pittsburgh."

According to statistics published in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Western Pennsylvania



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has the lowest proportion of Mormons among its population of any place in the United States. Coupled with the level of poverty here—Fayette County, which comprises the Uniontown Branch of our stake, is one of the poorest counties in the country—living in Pittsburgh is certainly an opportunity to recognize what a small part the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can do in addressing the world's problems.

This fact reminds me of a favorite quote from Elder Orson F. Whitney, a former member of the Quorum of the Twelve:

[God] is using not only his covenant people, but other peoples as well, to consummate a work, stupendous, magnificent, and altogether too arduous for this little handful of Saints to accomplish by and of themselves.⁴

Who are these other people contributing to God's work? What are some of the great works Elder Whitney had in mind? Elder Whitney was born in 1855. If we limit ourselves to events that have occurred since his birth, my (idiosyncratic) list might include:

- Abolition of slavery
- Women in the U. S. receiving the vote
- Development of the germ theory of disease
- Discovery of penicillin
- Quantum mechanics
- Picasso's *The Old Guitarist*
- The philosophy of William James
- The civil rights movement
- The information age
- Invention of the electric guitar

Mormons have been able to play only a small part in these artistic, scientific, and cultural works because we have been a small population who for much of our existence had been trying to survive in an inhospitable environment. But are these works the work of God? For the most part, yes. Hugh B. Brown, former member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and counselor in the First Presidency to David O. McKay, said:

Revelation does not come only through the prophet of God nor only directly from heaven in visions or dreams. Revelation may come in the laboratory, out of the test tube, out of the thinking mind and the inquiring soul, out of search and research and prayer and inspiration.⁵

In all this good God is achieving with other people, is he using other churches? Of course. But didn't the Lord say in the First Vision that all the professors of other religions were corrupt? Elder William Grant

Bangerter tells of President Hinckley's response to that question when it was raised by a group of ministers as they toured the Jordan River Temple prior to its dedication. President Hinckley asserted that the Lord did not say that. But it is a common belief.

Early in my mission, I challenged a zone conference talk given by a Church leader that implied ministers were primarily motivated by money. The foundation for my disagreement came from that talk by Elder Bangerter, which had been published in the *Ensign*. Elder Bangerter began with the story of President Hinckley and the ministers at the temple and went on to make the following claims:

It is clearly apparent that there have been and now are many honorable and devoted men and women in other churches who are moving in the direction of their eternal salvation and who give righteous and conscientious service to their congregations. . . .

Are ministers of other churches inspired of God? Of course they are, if they are righteous and sincere. Do they accomplish good? Certainly. . . .

Can ministers of other churches call forth blessings from God upon their people? Most assuredly they can and do.⁶

Elder Bangerter's comments are based on a deeply rooted universalist strain within Mormonism. In the Book of Mormon, we read:

Know ye not that there are more nations than one? Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all men, and that I remember those who are upon the isles of the sea; and that I rule in the heavens above and in the earth beneath; and I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth? . . .

For I command all men, both in the east and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them. . . . I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it. (2 Nephi 29:7, 11–12)

Early in the twentieth century, Elder B. H. Roberts taught:

Now, while the Church is one of God's instrumentalities for making known the truth, we do not maintain that he is limited to this

Church for such purposes, neither in time nor place. We hold that all great teachers are servants of God, inspired men appointed to instruct the children of God according to the condition in which they are found.⁷

More recently, President Howard W. Hunter taught:

All human beings share an inheritance of divine light. God operates among his children in all nations, and those who seek God are entitled to further light and knowledge, regardless of their race, nationality, or cultural traditions. . . .

As members of the Lord's church, we need to lift our vision beyond personal prejudices. We need to discover the supreme truth that indeed our Father is no respecter of persons. Sometimes we unduly offend brothers and sisters of other nations by assigning exclusiveness to one nationality of people over another.⁸

*We Are Not Always Inspired;
We are Not Always Inspiring*

GOD uses us as instruments despite our imperfections. Some church leaders are arrogant; others lack tact. Some members are thin-skinned; others, reprehensible. It has always been this way and will always be this way. Joseph Smith had deep character flaws that were difficult even for his contemporaries to accept.⁹

David O. McKay commented that when God makes the prophet, he doesn't unmake the man. So it is also with stake presidents, bishops, Relief Society presidents, Young Women presidents, Sunday School teachers, and high councilors. In every one of us are human elements that are unlikeable. For some, finding these flaws in high church leaders can be fatal to their testimony. Joseph Smith is a minutely documented historical figure, his flaws and failures well known. In contrast, what do we know about Peter, James, or John? Isaiah, Abraham, Mary Magdalene, Adam, or Eve? For the most part, their flaws are long since lost to history.

George Bernard Shaw's warning, "Beware of the pursuit of the Superhuman. It leads to an indiscriminate contempt for the human," could be rephrased for us as, "Beware of the pursuit of the Super Latter-day Saint. It leads to an indiscriminate contempt for the Latter-day Saint."¹⁰ Ours is the opportunity and responsibility to have a more realistic under-



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standing of how God interacts with men and women.

Last year as part of my high council assignment, I attended ward conferences throughout our stake and talked about intelligent discipleship and classroom instruction. After one of the conferences, a young man came up to me to discuss a conceptual difficulty he was struggling with. He had been reading about J. Reuben Clark. When David O. McKay became Church president, he selected Stephen L. Richards as his first counselor and President Clark to be his second counselor. Presidents McKay and Richards were personally close and philosophically similar. President Clark was the odd man out. He would arrive at every First Presidency meeting virtually assured that he would be outvoted 2-1 on all the major topics of the day.

This young man asked me, "How could the Spirit be inspiring these men in two opposite directions?"

"Why must we assume that the Spirit was directing these debates?" I asked back.

The very structure of the Church assumes that we are imperfect, not always inspired. If not so, we wouldn't have councils, presidencies, bishoprics—we would have only presidents and bishops.

The Reed Smoot hearings were a time when the questions of Church theocracy and claims of infallibility were being debated in the U.S. Senate and in public opinion at large—perhaps the time in Church history when we were under the closest public scrutiny. During the hearings, the *Improvement Era*, the Church's official organ, edited by President Joseph F. Smith, published a sermon by B. H. Roberts, the Church's acknowledged "defender of the faith," that laid out what can reasonably be considered the Church's position on the relationship of inspiration and revelation in Church government:

There is nothing in the doctrines of the Church which makes it necessary to believe that [men are constantly under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit], even . . . men who are high officials of the Church. When we consider the imperfections of men, their passions and prejudices, that mar the Spirit of God in them, happy is the man who can occasionally ascend to the spiritual heights of inspiration and commune with God! . . .

We should recognize the fact that we do many things by our own uninspired intelligence for the issues of which we are ourselves responsible. . . . He will help men at need, but I think it improper to assign every word and every act of a man to an inspiration from the Lord. . . . Hence, I think it a reasonable conclusion to say that constant, never-varying inspiration is not a factor in the administration of the affairs of the Church; not even good men, no, not even though they be prophets or other high officials of the Church, are at all times and in all things inspired of God. It is only occasionally, and at need, that God comes to their aid.

That there have been unwise things done in the Church by good men, men susceptible at time to the inspiration of the Spirit of God, we may not question. Many instances in the history of the Church, through three quarters of a century, prove it, and it would be a solecism to say that God was the author of those unwise, not to say positively foolish, things that have been done. For these things men must stand responsible, not God.

It is well nigh as dangerous to claim too much for the inspiration of God, in the affairs of men, as it is to claim too little. By the first, men are led into superstition, and into blasphemously accrediting their own imperfect actions, their blunders, and possibly even their sins,

to God; and by the second, they are apt to altogether eliminate the influence of God from human affairs; I pause in doubt as to which conclusion would be the worse.¹¹

These mistakes Elder Roberts refers to range from the trivial to the painful. As a simple example, consider the building program. In the 1960s, we spent excessive amounts of money constructing large buildings for very small congregations throughout the world. This drove us nearly to bankruptcy. In a perhaps overcorrection, in the 1990s, we built buildings that were too small, such as our meetinghouse, a problem to which I'm sure many of you here would be glad to attest.

More serious mistakes exist, and there is no way to hide from them, nor should we. An upcoming PBS documentary will outline many of them in unflattering and perhaps biased detail. It is imperative that our understanding of Church leadership be mature and sound.

Often mistakes are rooted in the cultural baggage our leaders inherit. As an example, consider the topic of waltzes. Brigham Young banned waltzing; however, John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff allowed it on a limited scale. The general question of whether to waltz or not to waltz, the preferred form of dancing at the time being square dancing, continued to bubble around in meetings of the Quorum of the Twelve and the First Presidency until well into the twentieth century. By 1912, waltzing had been accepted as the social norm, and Church leaders were now debating the propriety of jazz and Latin dancing. Eventually they realized that sexual chastity of youth was the gospel principle they were concerned with, not the manner of their dancing.¹²

Was God directing these discussions regarding dancing? Or were the leaders struggling to differentiate their merely cultural preferences from gospel principles? A scriptural illustration of this struggle is found in the New Testament character of Peter. Peter had to overcome his cultural sense of what was unclean in order to learn "what God hath cleansed, that call not thou common" (Acts 10:15). Despite Christ's charge at his Ascension to preach the gospel to every crea-

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ture, Peter required a later vision to realize that "God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him" (Acts 10:34–35). But even with this realization, Peter struggled to let go of the traditional Jewish separation from Gentiles, leading Paul to rebuke him at a conference in Jerusalem. (See Galatians 1–2.)

If we look at how the Church came to extend priesthood to all worthy men, we can see a complex mix of cultural tradition and social interactions, of confronting challenging problems and receiving or waiting for inspiration. As the Church started to expand out in the world, it encountered on a large scale the implications of the priesthood ban: thousands of people joining the Church in Nigeria without any means of weekly administration of the sacrament or the formation of basic Church government; multitudes of would-be converts in South America who couldn't prove that they did not have any Negro ancestors; governments refusing to officially recognize the Church. This exposure prompted President McKay to make a vigorous internal examination of the practice, leading to administrative decisions that reduced the scope of the priesthood ban. Apostolic committees concluded that there was no scriptural basis for the ban, and further policy changes were proposed and debated but not accepted. President McKay earnestly sought a revelation but did not receive one. Finally, in 1978, a definitive revelation eliminated the priesthood ban. The time frame for all of this? Decades.¹³

Being a church that is entitled to revelation to a prophetic leadership but yet where the leaders are often left on their own can create challenges that may be unique to our church. The challenges may be different for leaders and members, but the primary virtues for coping with these challenges are the same: humility, tolerance, and patience.

In the preface to his play, *Saint Joan*, George Bernard Shaw wrote, "The Churches must learn humility as well as teach it." President Brown warned Church leaders to remember that they are fallible¹⁴ and offered this broader call to humility for all of us:

We have been blessed with much knowledge by revelation from God

which, in some part, the world lacks. But there is an incomprehensibility greater part of truth which we must yet discover. Our revealed truth should leave us stricken with the knowledge of how little we really know. It should never lead to an emotional arrogance based upon a false assumption that we somehow have all the answers—that we in fact have a corner on truth. For we do not.¹⁵

I need humility to recognize that I might be wrong. I need tolerance to allow others to make different mistakes than those I make; I need tolerance to allow others to make a different choice among equally plausible options than I would have made. I need to have the patience to remember that dramatic changes are rarely effective; I need patience to remember that fostering defensiveness in leaders usually slows change; I need patience to remember that even great ideas are often only accepted over centuries.

These virtues are necessary, but they are not sufficient. We must also have a meaningful relationship with our Heavenly Father. In the fall of 1993, I found myself very upset with the Church. While reading a Eugene England essay, I came across a Hugh Nibley quotation suggesting what to do when one is upset with the Church:

Be the importunate widow and complain. Itemize your griefs, your doctrinal objections, your personal tastes. Lay them out in full detail and get it out of your system. . . . With this understanding—you will do all this before the only Person qualified to judge either you or your tormentors.¹⁶

I followed Nibley's advice and went into our living room, knelt down, and in prayer laid out all my complaints about the Church. I received a very distinct answer to my prayer. I wandered back to our bedroom with an uneasy peace in my soul. The unease came from the fact that I didn't receive an answer that I was wrong and that everything in my church was how it should be. The answer was simply yet directly, "This is not your battle."



Making the Church True and Living

MY final point is that we are responsible for making the Church true and living. This can be a painful responsibility. My favorite example of an individual striving to make the church true and living is that of Chieko Okazaki. As her life illustrates, we help to make the church true and living by being positively different than the mean, creating a gradient force pulling others towards progression. Unfortunately, being different can be dangerous, as Sister Okazaki describes:

Ed and I and our boys have spent a big chunk of our lives being different. There have been many, many occasions when Ed and I could have taken offense. . . .

But she knew she had an important contribution to make to the Church, that the Church would be something less true and living if she were not participating in it. She learned to respond strategically to her problems. From her life experiences, she makes this plea to all of us:

If you experience the pain of exclusion at church from someone who is frightened at your difference, please don't leave. Don't become inactive. You may think you are voting with your feet, that you are making a statement by leaving. You are, but your absence may be welcomed and encouraged by those who don't understand or value you. They see your diversity as a problem to be fixed, as a flaw to be corrected or erased. If you are gone, they don't have to deal with you any more. I want you to know that your diversity is a more valuable statement.¹⁷

B. H. Roberts drew great significance from the name of our church. It is not "The Church of Jesus Christ," nor is it "The



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Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days.” It is “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” The parallelism “of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” invoked in Elder Roberts’s mind a sense of joint ownership.¹⁸ We are responsible for the Church being true and living. The Church remains true and living as we individually personify the great gospel ideals, as we examine our lives and recognize the patterns of divine influence and from that recognition form a more powerful testimony of God and Jesus Christ. The Church remains true and living as we constantly examine the fundamental principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ and examine how well we are realizing them, seeking changes individually and collectively as needed. The burden of making the Church true and living does not just fall on President Hinckley. It falls on all of us.

There have been and will be great debates within Mormonism about important topics: the nature of God; the breadth of the Fall; the blessings of the priesthood; who are sheep and who are goats. Sometimes, as with blacks and the priesthood, these debates are resolved through revelation; sometimes we seem to progress linearly, continually refining our understanding and practice; other times our changes seem more cyclic, with ideas and practices coming in and out of favor.

One thing is certain: we need to keep an open mind, to seek and accept the changes needed to more fully realize the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The promise of continuing revelation means that in the future, we will do some things differently than we do now; we will think differently about some things in the future than we think now.

There are many challenges facing us today that we need to contribute to solving. For example, compared to twenty years ago, when I graduated from seminary, a flood of information about the Church has become

available in libraries and on the Internet. We need to develop a Church curriculum that creates robust testimonies in the presence of this information. Another challenge is to better incorporate the knowledge and insights of women into Church government. Along these lines, Elder Ballard has counseled that we should replace one of the monthly ward PEC meetings with an additional ward council meeting where the women leaders attend and contribute. This counsel is not yet canonized, yet it illustrates the realization that we are underutilizing an important resource in the Church and that a discussion is underway about how to do better.

Conclusion

I BEGAN this talk with a mathematical legend related to a false premise. I will end by quoting from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130:

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun. . .

I love the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I know that this institution is the seed of the kingdom of God on earth. I am grateful for the restoration of the priesthood and the blessings I have received through it. I am grateful for the opportunities I have had to attend the temple and receive personal revelation for my life. I am grateful for the privilege I have to work within this institution to bring about the salvation of mankind. I am grateful that there are millions of good men and women outside of the Church who are working with us, knowingly or unknowingly, to achieve this salvation. I am grateful that I am part of a living church that seeks change, seeks greater insight. I am grateful God has invited each one of us to be his partner in accomplishing these changes. I am grateful that I have come to accept and love the Church despite its imperfections.

Though Shakespeare recognized his lover’s eyes were less bright than the sun, her lips less red than coral, and that her beauty fails in several other ways, he concludes:

*And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.*

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

NOTES

1. This story is told in Keith Devlin, *Mathematics and the Science of Patterns* (New York: Scientific American Library, 1994), 17.
2. John A. Widtsoe, “Is It Wrong to Doubt?” in *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 31–33.
3. “B. H. Roberts on the Intellectual and Spiritual Quest,” sermon reprinted in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 123–28.
4. Quoted in Howard W. Hunter, *That We Might Have Joy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 60.
5. Edwin B. Firmage, ed., *An Abundant Life: The Memoirs of Hugh B. Brown* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 138. See also Hugh B. Brown, *The Abundant Life* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 88.
6. Elder William Grant Bangerter, “It’s a Two-Way Street,” *Ensign*, July 1986.
7. B. H. Roberts, “Relation of Inspiration and Revelation to Church Government,” *Improvement Era*, March 1905, 362.
8. Hunter, *That We Might Have Joy*, 60, 74.
9. For discussion of Joseph Smith’s character, see Bushman’s biography *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 249–50, 294–304. See also B. H. Roberts, “The Prophet’s Self-Revelment to the Intelligent Disciple,” *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1930), 2:355–61.
10. George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*, Act III.
11. Roberts, “Relation of Inspiration,” 365–66. In an interview published with Joseph Smith in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* on 15 September 1843, the reporter writes, “Speaking of revelations, he [Joseph Smith] stated that when he was in a ‘quandary,’ he asked the Lord for a revelation, and when he could not get it, he ‘followed the dictates of his own judgment.’” See Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:443.
12. See Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1986), 150–51.
13. I drew this synopsis from Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 60–105. See also, Armand L. Mauss, “The Fading of Pharaoh’s Curse,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1981); Leonard J. Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 175–83.
14. Firmage, *An Abundant Life*, 123.
15. Hugh B. Brown, address to BYU student body 13 May 1969, reprinted as “An Eternal Quest: Freedom of the Mind,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 77–83.
16. Cited in Eugene England, “On Spectral Evidence,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 151.
17. Chieko Okazaki, *Cat’s Cradle* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1993), 60–61.
18. Roberts, “Relation of Inspiration,” 362.