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1989 to 2012

LESSONS FROM THE Sacred GROVE

In 1993, four years after my call to the Seventy, my family and I were asked to serve in the New York Rochester Mission. That mission includes the town of Palmyra (where Joseph Smith and his family lived during much of the 1820s) and Fayette (where the Church was organized in April 1830).

It is picturesque country, characterized by rolling, wooded hills; clear lakes and streams; and warm, colorful people. It is also a place made sacred by what happened there.

In a grove of towering beeches, oaks, maples, and other trees located about a quarter mile west of the Joseph and Lucy Mack Smith family home near Palmyra, 14-year-old Joseph Smith saw in vision God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. This divine manifestation, in response to Joseph's prayer to know the truth concerning religion, began the Restoration of the gospel in this final dispensation. It also made that grove of trees a revered place in the history of the Church—a place we honor with the name Sacred Grove.

My family and I came to love that grove of trees and to feel of its sacredness. We went there often. Each month as new missionaries arrived and as those finishing their missions departed, we took them there.

As I have reverently walked through the Sacred Grove or sat in thought on the benches provided there, I have often reflected on the abundance of scriptural imagery involving trees, branches, roots, seeds, fruits, and forests. A careful observer can learn some significant lessons from the ecosystem that exists there. I wish to briefly share four of those lessons.¹

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1. Trees always grow toward the light.

In the Sacred Grove, the trees growing on the edge of the original forest and lining many of the interior pathways have grown outward to escape the overshadowing foliage above them and then upward to absorb the greatest possible sunlight. Their crooked trunks and branches stand in stark contrast to neighboring trees that grow almost perfectly straight. Trees, like almost all living organisms, need light to survive and thrive. They will do all in their power to soak in as much sunlight as possible to promote photosynthesis—the process of converting light energy into chemical energy.

Light is an even more important catalyst in the spiritual realm than it is in nature. This is so because light is essential to our spiritual growth and the realization of our full potential as God’s sons and daughters.

Darkness is the opposite of light and represents the forces in the world that seek to separate us from God and to frustrate His divine plan for our lives. It is usually after dark or in dark places that the forces of evil exert their greatest influence. Breaches of the law of chastity, acts of stealing, violations of the Word of Wisdom, and other behaviors forbidden by our Heavenly Father usually occur under cover of darkness. Even when we choose to do wrong during broad daylight, we can’t help but have feelings of darkness.

Fortunately, the Spirit of Christ “giveth light to every man that cometh into the world; and the Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world, that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit.

“And every one that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit cometh unto God, even the Father” (D&C 84:46–47).

This passage beautifully describes the upward reach of God’s children, the natural God-given spiritual instinct we all have—if we don’t stifle it—to go toward the light and, in so doing, to go toward God and His Son and to become more like Them. Of Himself, Christ said, “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12).

I urge you to avoid the darkness of sin in all its vile forms and to fill your lives with Spirit, truth, and the light of our Savior, Jesus Christ. You can do this by seeking noble friends, inspiring music and art, knowledge out of the best books (especially the scriptures), moments of sincere prayer, quiet times in nature, wholesome activities and conversations, and a life centered on Christ and His teachings of love and service.



2. Trees require opposition to fulfill the measure of their creation.

Various schools of thought about forest management have been followed through the years in caring for the Sacred Grove. At one time a test plot was selected for a practice known as *release thinning*. Foresters identified what they felt were potentially the largest and healthiest young trees in the test plot, and then they cut and pruned out the less-promising trees and the competing undergrowth. The supposition was that by removing much of the competition for water, sunlight, and soil nutrients, the chosen trees would be *released* to grow and develop in extraordinary ways.

After some years it became obvious that just the opposite was occurring. Once freed from competition, the



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chosen trees became complacent. Instead of stretching upward toward the light, they slowed their vertical growth, put out many lower limbs that eventually became useless when the canopy closed, and became fatter. None of the trees in the test plot compared in size or vitality to the trees that had to compete and overcome opposition in order to survive and thrive.

One of the key doctrines of the Book of Mormon is that there must be “an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11). A world with opposites provides choices between good and evil so that agency can operate. Equally important, however, is the principle that opposition must exist for spiritual growth to occur. Understanding and embracing this principle is a key to accepting and being generally happy with life. It is also critical to experiencing needed personal growth and development.

Sooner or later, all of us will encounter opposition and adversity. Some of it will come simply as a result of being here in mortality in a fallen world. It may involve forces of nature, illness and disease, temptations, loneliness, or physical or mental imperfections. Sometimes opposition and hardship come because of our misguided choices. How grateful we should be to our Savior, whose Atonement provides a way for the mending of everything that is broken.

I take great solace from the Lord’s words to Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail at a time when Joseph’s burdens were nearly unbearable: “Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122:7).

Some trees in the Sacred Grove demonstrate that opposition can work to our benefit

and that in our extremity there is often much to be gained. These trees have had to recover from various forms of opposition or adversity—a lightning strike, a powerful gust of wind, a heavy accumulation of snow or ice, the encroachment and abuse of careless humans, and sometimes the aggression of a neighboring tree. Out of these adverse circumstances have come some of the sturdiest and most visually interesting trees in the grove.

3. Trees grow best in forests, not in isolation.

In nature it’s unusual to see a tree standing alone. Trees almost always grow in groves, and over time groves may become forests. The Sacred Grove, however, is much more than just a group of trees. It is a complicated ecosystem that includes numerous species of flora and fauna.

There is an observable interconnectedness among all the different varieties of wildflowers, bushes, shrubs, trees, fungi, mosses, birds, rodents, rabbits, deer, and other creations found there. These species interact and rely on one another for food, shelter, and a synergistic and social environment where they can experience their cycle of life.

God’s plan for our lives contemplates a similar interconnectedness for us. We are to work out our salvation together, not in isolation. The Church builds meetinghouses, not hermitages.





From the beginning of the Restoration, the command has been for us to gather in communities, where we can learn to live in harmony and mutually support one another by honoring our baptismal covenants (see Mosiah 18:8–10). As God’s children, we can no more prosper in isolation than can a solitary tree. Healthy trees need an ecosystem; healthy people need each other.

Thankfully, there is in all of us a longing for sociality, companionship, and loyal friends. As members of God’s eternal family, we all yearn for the satisfaction and security that close and lasting relationships can provide. Although social networking sites undoubtedly provide a form of sociality, they are no substitute for the honest, open, face-to-face communication that must occur for authentic and lasting relationships to be established.

Certainly the earliest and best laboratory for learning to get along with others is the home. At home we learn the lessons of service, unselfishness, forgiveness, and patience that are essential to the formation of lasting relationships with others.

Happily, the inspired organization of the Church also provides settings where we can develop socially. In Church callings, meetings, classes, quorums, councils, activities, and a variety of other opportunities for association, we develop the attributes and social skills that help prepare us for the social order that will exist in heaven.

In speaking of this higher order, the Prophet Joseph Smith said, “And that same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy” (D&C 130:2).

4. Trees draw strength from the nutrients created by previous generations of trees.

There was a time when those in charge of caring for the Sacred Grove decided that the grove should be well groomed. Service projects were then organized to clear the grove of fallen trees and limbs, undergrowth, stumps, and dead leaves. Under this practice, it wasn’t long before the vitality of the grove began to diminish. Tree growth slowed, fewer new trees sprouted, some species of wildflowers and plants began to disappear, and the numbers of birds and other wildlife decreased.

Later, upon recommendation that the grove be left in as natural a state as possible, fallen trees and limbs were left to decompose and enrich the soil. Leaves were left lying where they fell. Visitors were asked to stay on marked pathways so that the grove would be less disturbed and the soil within the grove less compacted. Within just a few years, the grove began to regenerate and renew itself in a remarkable way. Today it flourishes in a nearly pristine state, with lush vegetation and abundant wildlife.

The lesson to be learned from this experience is dear to my heart. For seven years it was my privilege to serve as Church historian and recorder. Why do record keeping and the collection, preservation, and sharing of

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history enjoy such importance in the Church of Jesus Christ? Why is it critical for us to be mindful of and draw strength from past generations? (See D&C 21:1; 69:3, 8.)

I suggest that it is impossible to live fully in the present—much less to plan for our future destiny—without the foundation of the past. Understanding the relationship of the past to the present and to the future helps us more fully appreciate the Lord's



definition of truth as revealed to Joseph Smith: “Truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come” (D&C 93:24).

The knowledge we have of our past because of the records that have been kept and of our future because of the scriptures and the teachings of living prophets provides us with the context that allows wise use of our agency.

It is important that we become familiar with our Church's history, especially with its founding stories. These stories—Joseph Smith's First Vision, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, angelic visitations by John the Baptist, Peter, James, John, Elijah, Elias, and others—contain the foundational truths upon which the Restoration is based.

Regrettably, in this technological age, where information abounds—some of it critical of events and people in the Church's history—some Latter-day Saints become shaken in their faith and begin to question long-held beliefs. To such questioning individuals I extend love, understanding, and the assurance that if they will abide by gospel principles and prayerfully pursue their study of Church history—studying sufficiently to gain a more comprehensive rather than a fragmentary or incomplete knowledge—the Holy Ghost will confirm their faith in the essential events in Church history by speaking peace to their minds. In this way they can become settled in their convictions concerning the history of the restored Church.

Conclusion

When we were serving our mission near Palmyra, sometimes I would go into the Sacred Grove alone and stand in reverence next to my favorite “witness tree”—one of three living trees that were growing in the grove at the time of the First Vision. I used to imagine that if that tree could talk, it would tell me what it witnessed that spring day in 1820. But I really didn't need that tree to tell me—I already knew.

By virtue of spiritual experiences and feelings beginning in my youth and continuing to this very hour, I have come to know that God, our Father, lives. I know too that His Son, Jesus Christ, is the Savior and Redeemer of all mankind. I know that these two glorified Beings appeared to Joseph Smith.

These glorious truths have their beginning in the Sacred Grove. I encourage you to stand always in your minds and hearts in that sacred place and live true to the truths that God began to reveal there. ■

From a CES devotional address, “Stand in the Sacred Grove,” given in California, USA, on May 6, 2012. For the full address, visit cesdevotionals.lds.org.

NOTE

1. I am indebted to Robert Parrott, a forester and naturalist employed by the Church who lives in Palmyra, for bringing to my attention some of the insights about the Sacred Grove that I share.