

Advice from a Prophet: Take Time Out

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Richard O. Cowan

Keeping fit is an ideal that has been advocated prominently during recent years both in and out of the Church. Yet some Latter-day Saints wonder if there is time for physical recreation or relaxation when there is so much that needs to be accomplished. Many cite the examples of Church leaders who “labor tirelessly in the Lord’s work.”

Two letters, found at the Church Historical Department, may bring perspective to our understanding of how some of the General Authorities have dealt with the pressures confronting them. In this exchange of letters eighty-year-old Heber J. Grant counsels a younger apostle, Joseph Fielding Smith, who some thirty years later would himself become the President of the Church. Notice the spirit in which the President’s advice was given and received.

President Grant spoke from experience when he gave counsel respecting rest and physical activity. His interest in sports began early. For example, as President Grant spoke of overcoming difficulties through persistent effort (one of his favorite themes), he often cited his accomplishing the goal of playing on a championship baseball team.¹

In his mature years Heber J. Grant faithfully exercised thirty to forty-five minutes each morning before leaving his room. In 1931 he observed:

I have excellent health, and attribute part of it to the fact that for several years past I have seldom missed a day without taking exercise unless I had the privilege of playing a game of golf.²

Without a doubt golf was one of President Grant’s favorite pastimes, and he found time for this game as often as he could. His diary records a sense of pride when he was able to win a game and post a respectable score. “There is no question about it,” he wrote, “golf does take one’s mind off everything else and refreshes the body and the mind.”³ Nevertheless President Grant often combined business with pleasure, discussing important ecclesiastical or business matters with his golfing companions; this was especially true during his frequent trips to southern California.

Another feature of President Grant’s regimen was a one or two hour nap taken each afternoon in his office. He recalled: “I got a new lease on life when I was in England by learning to take a nap after my noon meal, which I still do nearly always.”⁴ The following is President Grant’s letter:⁵

December 31, 1938

Elder Joseph Fielding Smith
Building

My dear Joseph:

I was delighted last night to listen to you and your good wife sing. I am thankful to think you are going to take a little bit of time to sing and to visit with your loved ones, instead of working, working, working. I am sure that the singing will prolong your life.

I don't want to flatter you, Joseph, but I want you to know that I consider you the best posted man on the scriptures of the General Authorities of the church that we have. I want you to prolong your life, I want you to make a business of trying to take care of yourself.

Now I am not overworking so long as I can get my quota of good sleep. I am not the least bit alarmed if I go on singing and traveling around releasing myself from the steady grind of work. I want you to do the same to the best of your ability. Your father worked altogether too hard. If he had taken a little more exercise, moving around, traveling away from home, and getting away from the cares and troubles of other people, it would have been better for him. He took a greater interest in the welfare of other people than almost any man who ever lived. He was my ideal of all the brethren from my childhood up to the day of his death. I am very grateful indeed for the fine letters I have from him, my dear cousin.

May the blessing of the Lord be and abide with you perpetually, and may you be enabled to work less and accomplish more, is the prayer of my heart. I am,

Your affectionate relative,
HEBER J. GRANT

Elder Joseph Smith, the recipient of President Grant's counsel, was also physically active and "vigorously interested in sports." He regularly enjoyed swimming and other activities at the Deseret Gymnasium next door to the Church Administration Building. He was "an able and enthusiastic handball player."⁶

In his later years, President Smith found relaxation in flying in jet airplanes. One of his biographers recalled:

I remember my surprise one day when I called at his office in Salt Lake City. His secretary . . . said, "Step to the window here and maybe you can see him." Curious, I walked to the window. But all that I could see was a jet streaking through the blue sky high above the Great Salt Lake. Its trail of white vapor clearly marked some steep climbs, loops, dives, rolls and turns. . . .

"You mean he's in that plane?" I asked incredulously.

"Oh yes, that's him all right. He's very fond of flying. Says it relaxes him. A friend in the National Guard calls him up and says, 'How about a relaxing?' and up they go. Once they get in the air he often takes over the controls. . . ."

I could not resist driving to the airport to be there when he landed. As the two-place T-bird roared down the runway to a stop, from the rear cockpit, in suit and helmet, climbed this benign old gentleman, then about 80, smiling broadly. “That was wonderful!” he exclaimed. “This about as close to heaven as I can get just now.”⁷

Joseph Fielding Smith had married Jessie Evans, a well-known opera singer, on 12 April 1938. President Grant’s letter indicates that the apostle and his bride were already singing together. Elder Smith did heed the President’s counsel to continue singing, but in later years he sometimes referred to singing in public with his wife as a “do it” rather than a duet.

Here is Elder Smith’s reply:

January 3, 1939

President Heber J. Grant
President Office

Dear President Grant:

Words fail me in attempting to express to you the great joy that came to me when I read your very kind letter of December 31st. I felt a lump come up in my throat and was touched deeply.

I shall try to profit by your counsel, and let me assure you that I prize this letter among the greatest of my earthly possessions.

It is needless for me to say to you that my father has always been my greatest inspiration. Never has temptation come before me in any form that the first thought that crossed my mind was “What would Papa (for that is what we children called him) say?” I have tried always never to do anything that I felt would grieve him or cause him sorrow.

Now that he not here, I appreciate your many kindnesses and pray the Lord to bless you abundantly. I uphold and sustain you with all my heart and wish you every blessing that in righteousness you could wish, and prolonged life to guide Israel.

With sincere appreciation, I remain,

Your kinsman and brother,
JOSEPH FIELDING SMITH

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1. See, for example, Heber J. Grant, *Gospel Standards* (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1941), pp. 342–43.

2. Heber J. Grant Diary, 19 May 1931, Church Historical Department.

3. *Ibid.*, 2 April 1930.

4. *Ibid.*, 31 December 1935.

5. *Ibid.*, 31 December 1938, and following pages for Grant’s letter and Smith’s reply. The reader may wonder why these two Church leaders referred to each other as “relative” and “kinsman”. Joseph Fielding Smith was a grandson of Hyrum Smith,

Joseph Smith's brother. Heber J. Grant's mother had been sealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith before her marriage to Jedediah M. Grant; thus, in terms of the temple sealing line, Heber was an adopted son of Joseph Smith and a first cousin, once removed, of Joseph Fielding Smith.

6. Richard L. Evans, "Joseph Fielding Smith, President of the Quorum of the Twelve," *Improvement Era*, September 1951, p. 627.

7. Joseph Fielding Smith, Jr. and James J. Stewart, *The Life of Joseph Fielding Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), pp. 1–2.