

What I learned about Live, the church, and the cosmos from Hugh Nibley

By Boyd Petersen

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February 24, 2005, was one of those beautiful false-spring days when we all leave our coats at home and venture out in shirt sleeves, despite the fact that we all know that winter will have one final gasp before yielding to spring. The snow had all melted from the valley floor, but the mountains were covered with a brilliant white snow pack that contrasted sharply against the deep blue sky. The temperatures were making their first climb into the seventies, and everyone wanted to be outside.

My students and I were all restless as I plodded through another lecture on formatting research papers. Between classes, I stopped by my office to check my e-mail when I got a call from my wife.

"He's gone," she practically whispered. I immediately knew. Hugh Nibley was no longer with us. We believe that, like the rest of us, Hugh had simply longed to be outside, to leave the hospital bed that had been his home for almost two years and enjoy the beautiful day.

I had been over at the Nibley house the day before Hugh's passing to discuss with others the difficult task of sorting out Hugh's final magnum opus, *One Eternal Round*. As usual, Hugh was sleeping in his hospital bed which was set up in the living room. We sat on the other side of the room discussing the problem that he was leaving: the dozens of boxes of manuscript, multiple printed and electronic versions of the book that, after occupying his mind for over two decades, he was never able to finish but finally able to let go of. Hugh's breathing seemed labored that day. I had heard of the so-called "death rattle," had never encountered it, but knew it when I heard it. I had hoped I was wrong. I didn't want to see Hugh leave us. And yet he had already left us in every other way. His physical abilities all left one by one, leaving little behind but a kind smile.

I never once heard him complain during those months prior to his death as he transformed from the independent man of words and action into "second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."¹ I already missed him long before he actually died.

It was a different group that gathered at the Nibley home on the morning on the twenty-fourth — Hugh's family, not colleagues. We hugged, we cried, and we laughed. I felt both sadness and great joy. Sadness to see him leave, but joy that I could say I had been blessed to know Hugh Nibley.

Hugh Nibley touched my life in many ways. I will always be grateful that he gave me Zina, his daughter, as my wife; that he saved her life when she was a small girl;² that he nurtured her with a wealth of books, culture, and wit. But as I came to know Hugh Nibley, he became more than my father-in-law. He came to be a father, the father of my spiritual self. From my earliest years, I had a deep hunger for religious experiences. I remember from my days as a Sunbeam in Primary learning of Joseph's vision in the Sacred Grove and praying to see it too. I craved the sacred. Yet my own parents, for many legitimate reasons, were never comfortable talking about religion. That part of me was nurtured by significant personal experiences and later youth leaders and seminary teachers.

But when I got to know Hugh Nibley, both personally and through his writings, I finally found someone who could talk to me honestly about my spiritual quest. He was never condescending, never trite, nor was he surprised by doubts. His words in his writings, his personal example, and his life story taught me many things that have both made me who I am today and showed me what I hope to become. And since Hugh died on February 24, the day after my own birthday, I will now remember his good life when I commemorate my own advancing years. I would like to share with you some of the very personal ways my life was enriched by Hugh Nibley.

Some things about life I learned by his bad example. For instance, always check to make sure your shoes match before leaving the house. If you are going to wear suspenders, it looks better to wear two than it does to wear one. Keep a legible journal, just in case someone wants to read it. Don't expect many people to laugh if you tell a joke and the punch line is in Greek. Pay attention to where you left your car. Don't forget that you are driving while enjoying the scenery. Keep track of your wallet. Mackerel and kidney beans don't mix well — especially as a beverage. Unlike cheese and wine, fedoras don't really improve with age. You don't need to wear sunglasses while watching TV. Even though it's often sold by big oil companies, windshield wiper fluid is not a secret combination. And plants don't really mind if you prune them.

But most of the valuable things I learned from Hugh Nibley came from his very good example. Here are a few of these, in no particular order.

Write Letters

It was the collection of letters Hugh wrote to Paul Springer that prompted me to write the biography. It was a wonderful collection of wit and erudition that was completely inspiring. Granted, when he read my portrait of him, Hugh was not altogether happy that he had saved these letters. To several family members he recited this little poem by an anonymous author:

Lives of great men all remind us
As their pages o'er we turn,
That we're apt to leave behind us;
Letters that we ought to burn.

I am sincerely grateful that he didn't burn his letters and that others preserved their correspondence with him. I know my family has been blessed by their contents, and I think all of us will bless our families by doing likewise.

Take Scriptures Seriously but Don't Assume that What You Were Taught in Primary was Right

One of the things that made Hugh's writings so much fun was the new insights he showed us. Many of these allowed us to both take the texts seriously, but abandon silly ideas that we may have learned in Primary. For example, in *The World of the Jaredites*, Hugh read Genesis 10:25 where it says that in the days of Peleg "the earth was divided" as "the earth was divided among the children of Noah," thus allowing us to keep the scriptures without imagining the drifting of continents at cataclysmic speeds. As Hugh points out, "a reader's first reaction to an ancient and fragmentary text usually becomes a lifelong credo, though research and revelation have combined in latter days to discredit [it]."³ Hugh had the ability to move us as readers into a more "mature" world of scripture study. While his answers were not always perfect, he set an example of taking the scriptures seriously, but also taking science seriously. He showed us that we didn't need to compromise either our faith or our brains.

Love Learning

Hugh loved learning for its own sake; he saw it as a good in and of itself. He had an insatiable curiosity and could speak intelligently about many subjects. Accompanying him on a trip was like having your own tour guide. He would point out rock formations, the names of plants, the patterns of clouds, the history of the people, and much more. He never lost the childish desire to understand everything. And his love for learning was contagious. One simply could not resist his joy.

Rank, Titles, Degrees Mean Little; Pay Attention to Amateurs

Hugh spoke often about the importance of amateurs. He pointed out to one correspondent that Einstein was "an amateur mathematician and an amateur astronomer" who "failed to gain admission to college and [whose] Ph.D. thesis was rejected." Hugh was no scholarly snob. He treated students as equals, often prefacing remarks with "of course everybody knows." What surprised him was that we really didn't know.

Look for Miracles in Everyday Life

Hugh had a wonderful ability to see God's hand in all things. This example from a letter he wrote to his friend Paul Springer in 1950 is a great illustration:

Against all expectations my magnificent estate is yielding tons of fruit. While conscientious farmers with much pruning and spraying have lost all their pears this year, nothing I can do will discourage our little tree from showering down its blessing with almost obscene abundance. That is what comes of paying tithing, my boy.⁴

I don't think for one minute that Hugh Nibley believed he was more righteous than his neighbors — that

his neighbors were being cursed while he was being blessed. Rather, I think it was a consistent frame of mind that Hugh had about all good things: they come from God. If there is nothing that offends God more than our not acknowledging His hand in all things (D&C 59:21), then Hugh Nibley was seldom guilty of this offense. I witnessed how grateful he was for all his blessings, large and small. He constantly acknowledged God's hand as the giver.

Assume the Lord is in Charge of Your Life

As Hugh advised one person,

Ask for the direction of the Holy Spirit every day and learn to recognize its whisperings. Then you will know exactly what steps to take and all the rest ... The Lord will guide you and in time you will find that our present-day Babylon will be but a distant memory.⁵

He took his own advice. In a letter to his son he confessed that,

I had certain projects all planned out for the summer, but the Spirit has been urging me to do other things, and that with such irresistible force that I have been devoting every bit of time to projects I would not have considered on my own. But I am being blessed and abetted in these strange researches which I am certain will have a telling impact somewhere.⁶

Hugh's life consistently bended to the will of the Lord.

Take Advantage of Serendipitous Moments

This concept, I believe, was related to Hugh's belief that the Lord is in charge. Since God is constantly blessing us in our daily lives, we should look for these blessings and take advantage of them. There were many episodes during World War II when Hugh's life was miraculously saved because he followed a prompting. But there were many more less thrilling episodes that Hugh expressed just as much gratitude for, when he happened upon some fact or footnote just when he needed it in his writing, or met someone he needed to meet, or was at the right place at the right time. As Scott Peck says, these "miracles of serendipity" are "amazingly commonplace" and need to be recognized in order to be fully implemented in our lives.⁷ Hugh had a gift for recognizing these serendipitous moments.

Don't Take Yourself Too Seriously

Hugh often stated that, "If you take yourself seriously, you won't take the gospel seriously and the other way around."⁸ One of my favorite examples of this comes from Curtis Wright, who was a graduate assistant for Hugh. One time Wright came into Hugh's office and found him there absorbed in reading the Book of Mormon and laughing. Wright asked Hugh what was so funny, and Hugh replied that he had found an error in the Book of Mormon. "You did, huh?" Wright responded. "Yes," Hugh stated and handed the scriptures to Wright pointing to Alma 42:10, which says that "man is carnal, sensual and devilish." "What's the matter with that?" demanded Wright. Hugh responded, "They left out stupid."

Hugh's delightful sense of humor spared no one, least of all himself. He was the first to laugh at himself. "Nobody takes me seriously," wrote Hugh to his son, "which has been my salvation."⁹

Get Outdoors Often

Nature provided Hugh rejuvenation and solace. Since his childhood growing up in Oregon, his greatest passion next to books was nature. After one excursion in the mountains he wrote, "suddenly I discover I haven't grown up." And during a particularly stressful period of life, Hugh wrote of nature's ability to heal:

After a few hours of sitting or walking about in a perfect emptiness of sand and air one imperceptibly relaxes and begins to soak up certain basic realizations which in any other setting would not be accepted without a struggle ... For me this was escape pure and simple, but I came back after another day greatly refreshed, having seen some marvelous country that I had never dreamed existed.

Hugh had a Wordsworthian appreciation for nature:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky;
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old.

And like Wordsworth, "The child [was] the father of the man," Hugh's childlike love of nature made him an outspoken advocate for preserving wilderness. He saw the good Nature did for his own soul, but also

recognized that our call to subdue the earth is a call to stewardship, not a license to exterminate.¹⁰

Defend the Church

Hugh devoted much of his work to defending the Church, both responding to anti-Mormon attacks and providing pro-Mormon arguments. He had other opportunities to publish, opportunities that would have helped his career, established his reputation, and earned him notoriety. Instead he cultivated his own garden of apologetics. Some have dismissed that cause as beneath him. In fact, his own friends, Lucien Goldschmidt and Paul Springer, became his harshest critics, admonishing him, "We see in you one of the few really first class minds of these muddled times voluntarily consigning itself to oblivion." Hugh responded,

Of course you are right, but not all right ... Where fourteen or fifteen ineffectual *Stubemensen* read my articles, hundreds of thousands have read Lehi in the form of a priesthood manual, and I get communications all the time telling how one way or another some of the stuff I have ground out has changed the life of this person or that and they are not all fools.¹¹

If You Disagree with Church Policy, Keep Quiet

There are several examples I could cite where Hugh disagreed with Church policy. But when he could not argue forcefully for the Church, he kept his mouth shut. During the debate over blacks and the priesthood, Hugh evidently disagreed with the policy. Nevertheless, he never voiced those beliefs until after the priesthood ban was lifted.¹²

I once asked him about something that might be seen as heretical today but which was not in the nineteenth century, and he responded, "I never think about that." Then he paused and restated, "Well, I think about it, but I never talk about it." This may seem cowardly to some, but clearly Hugh was able to do more for the Church by remaining loyal and quiet; he would have lost that ability had he come out in open opposition to the Church's position.

You Have to Earn the Right to Criticize

On cultural issues Hugh was never shy about speaking out. But he earned that right with his consistent and unwavering defense of the Church. I once read a book about marriage that I think is relevant to this topic. In *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, Dr. John Gottman argues that *the* single factor that can determine whether a marriage will survive is the ratio of praise to criticism. He found that in successful marriages there are at least five times as many positive messages as critical ones. I think this applies to our Church membership as well. In fact, Elder Maxwell once stated that Hugh's "commitment [has been] so visible and so pronounced and so repetitively stated that *that's* not even the issue. So then we can get on to what Hugh says."¹³

Don't Worry About Offending People with Your Opinions

When I sat in on Hugh's class, he had an older student who invited him to tour the Koyle Dream Mine. I am confident that this student wanted Hugh to visit the mine and come away converted so that they could use his name to promote stock sales. Hugh consented to take the tour and asked me if I'd like to accompany him. I found it a fascinating experience, but Hugh was not at all impressed. And he voiced that opinion in front of our guests. I was a little bit startled. It seemed bad manners to be so direct. But as I reflected on it later, it would have been far worse for him to leave this person with the idea that he was impressed. They wanted his support, and probably would have taken lukewarm acceptance as praise. Hugh gave them nothing they could use; they knew exactly where he stood.

People Can Disagree and Still be Friends

While Hugh was very direct about voicing his opinions, he did not let disagreements get in the way of friendships. In fact, most of his closest relationships involved people whose beliefs contradicted his own rather violently.

Paul Springer, his friend from his days at Berkeley, was politically far to the right of Hugh's left-wing views; religiously more secular than Hugh's deep Mormon views; and socially a womanizer and a bootlegger to Hugh's morally "strait and narrow" views.

While his friend Don Decker was far more tame than Springer, he was politically conservative and an unabashed military hawk. What Hugh found in these friendships was great conversation and a love for higher thought. He never bowed to "peer pressure" — everyone knew exactly where Hugh stood. Hugh would often chastise Springer for his shenanigans, but was also extremely supportive when Paul went through a messy divorce. Their friendship was loyal and long-standing.

Become a Common Face in the Temple

After the completion of the Provo Temple in 1972, Hugh made weekly temple attendance a priority, not

out of a sense of duty, but out of a sincere desire to learn.

If I went to the temple five times and nothing happened, I would stop going. But I've gone hundreds of times, and the high hopes of new knowledge with which I go up the hill every week are never disappointed.¹⁴

His insights were not always earth-shattering, but he always took away something new. He was such a common face in the temple that I even saw him get in once without a fully authorized recommend. Around 1996, I accompanied Hugh to the Provo Temple. He had lost his wallet the week before, and thus had to get a new license, BYU activity card, and temple recommend. He had started the process on his temple recommend, getting it signed by his bishop, but had forgotten that he didn't yet have it signed by his stake president. When we got to the temple doors, the gentleman at the front desk greeted Hugh by name, took a look at his recommend, and pointed out to Hugh that he needed to get it signed, but then let him in anyway.

Adore Little Children

Hugh loved his children and grandchildren. He loved nothing better than getting down on the ground and playing games with them, reading to them, or bouncing them on his knee. After our first child was born, he took one look at our newborn daughter and stated, "No wonder children are so cherished; they are our honored guests."

As a student of the ancient Middle Eastern customs, Hugh was not just speaking about how lovely it is to have a child in the home, but also about the law of hospitality — that one is required to be a good host for any guest, but especially for a guest of honor. Children were the most important visitors in the Nibley home.

The Three Most Important Things

The three most important things Hugh Nibley taught me are things he taught everyone else: To proclaim peace, to consecrate everything we have to the building up of Zion, and to remember that there are only two things we can be good at — things the angels envy us for: our ability to forgive and to repent. Hugh lived these principles with his life; he not only became an outspoken advocate for peace, he lived peacefully among his neighbors and befriended people he disagreed with. He lived in a small house, with few possessions, dedicating his resources to the Lord. And he was, to the very end, tirelessly working at forgiving and repenting. What was left in that hospital bed in the weeks prior to his death was nothing but love.

When one visitor asked him a probing question about the definition of "love," Hugh pointed to Phyllis, who had consecrated so much of her life to her husband's work and who now waited on his every need, and he simply said, "There she is."

I contrast the last days of Hugh Nibley with the last conversation he had with his dying grandfather, Charles W. Nibley. Charles W. Nibley was not a bad person. He had been in the Presiding Bishopric and the First Presidency, but as he reflected on his life and on the compromises he had to make in his business dealings, he looked at Hugh from his bed and said, "You see that window? If an angel were to come through that door, I would jump right out that window."

That conversation had a lasting influence on Hugh Nibley, reorienting his life and giving him purpose. During the final weeks of his life, Hugh was asked if he was afraid of death. Hugh's response was quite different from his grandfather's: "It's like that Bach chorale," said Hugh. "Come, sweet death, come blessed rest." Hugh was at peace with his life. Likewise he was eager for the adventure that lay beyond. I will miss him.

Notes

¹ Shakespeare, "As You Like It," II, vii.

² See *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2002), 131.

³ *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company and FARMS, 1988), 173-174.

⁴ Hugh Nibley to Paul Springer, Autumn 1950.

⁵ Hugh Nibley to Craig F. Kinghorn, 14 April 1980.

⁶ Hugh Nibley to Charles Alexander Nibley, 27 June 1980.

⁷ M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Touchstone, 1978), 255.

⁸ "Nibley the Scholar: An Interview with Hugh Nibley by Louis Midgley," 2; transcript of forum

assembly, 21 May 1974.

⁹ Curtis Wright interview, 24 September 2001. Hugh Nibley to Charles Alexander Nibley, 16 November 1979.

¹⁰ Hugh Nibley to Paul Springer, 20 August 1962; Hugh Nibley to Paul Springer, n.d. ca. 1957; see Hugh's essay "Man's Dominion, or Subduing the Earth," *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, edited by Don E. Norton and Shirley S. Ricks. Vol. 13 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company and FARMS, 1994).

¹¹ Paul Springer to Hugh Nibley, 15 May 1958 (Paul was expressing this on behalf of Lucien Goldschmidt and himself); Hugh Nibley to Paul Springer, 24 May 1958.

¹² See *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life*, 338-340 and 368-369.

¹³ John Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail, and How to Make Yours Last* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); *Faith of an Observer*.

¹⁴ Hugh Nibley, "An Intellectual Autobiography," *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 1978), xxviii.

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