

Talk given by Gracia Jones at the Joseph Smith Sr., and Lucy Mack Smith family reunion in the Kirtland Temple August 7, 2011

In Family Unity there is Power and the Promise of Eternal Joy

It is a great privilege to be here in this wonderful old building—the Kirtland Temple—to meet as descendants of Joseph Smith Sr., and Lucy Mack Smith.

It seems appropriate on this occasion to share a poem written by David Hyrum Smith, youngest son of the Prophet Joseph Smith. During his lifetime David did not have the opportunity to know his prophet father, or worship or preach in this place. David had a passion for nature—in his poem he compares the beauty of nature’s creations and compares it to “The House of the Lord”; note how he expresses his feeling of the temple and its importance in connection with his family.

Here, I quote an excerpt of David’s poem, The House of the Lord:

You may sing of the beauty of mountain and dale,  
Of the silvery stream-let and flow’rs of the vale;  
But the place most delightful this earth can afford  
Is the place of devotion—the house of the Lord.

You may talk of your prospects of fame or of wealth,  
And the hopes that oft flatter the fav’rites of health;  
But the hope of bright glory—of heavenly bliss,  
Take away every other, and give me but this.

Ever hail, blessed temple, abode of my Lord!  
I will turn to thee often, to hear from thy word,  
I will walk to the altar with those that I love,  
And delight in the prospect revealed from above.

Hesperis, Saint’s Herald, Lamoni, IA., (1911 edition compiled by Elbert A. Smith) p. 221

I think all of us here feel very special about being in the Kirtland Temple—the first “House of the Lord” which was built at great sacrifice and devotion by our ancestors and their friends.

We appreciate those who have allowed us to be here to enjoy this day together.

Being together at this reunion brings many reflections to my mind—this is the twenty-first such gathering of the descendants of Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith.

The first reunion was held in August 1972, in Nauvoo, Illinois. The theme for that reunion was “The Joy of Being Together”.

Since I am one of the few left who has attended every reunion, from the start, I am often asked “How did these reunions begin?”

There are as many perceptions regarding that question as there are people who participated.

My own experience began when Buddy Youngreen, not a Smith by blood, but one who, after he had joined the LDS Church, began researching the Smith family history in order to write and produce a play on the life of Joseph Smith. In his search for Smith family members, from whom he hoped to learn about the Smith family history, Buddy discovered that the posterity of Father and Mother Smith was scattered far and wide across the world; and many of the descendants he found often knew little or nothing of their own heritage and actually knew little or nothing about each other.

I received a telephone call from him in early in 1972. I had never met him or heard of him. He told me he had learned about me from someone in the genealogy department of the Church, who told him I was a descendant, and a member of the LDS Church, living in Montana.

He explained that he had traveled far and wide to meet Smith family members. He confided to a friend, Clinton Larson, a professor at Brigham Young University, his concern that the Smith family was so scattered and lost from each other. Clinton Larson made the comment that it might be good to have a reunion for the descendants of Joseph's parents—thus bringing together the far flung family. It seemed like a good idea; but how did one begin?

Buddy had also met Joseph Byron Smith, a great grandson of Samuel H. Smith. As they talked about the family being so scattered, the *idea* of such a reunion took root. Plans began to formulate in earnest. Joseph Byron made a phone call to W. Wallace Smith, great grandson of the Prophet Joseph Smith, then president of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) with headquarters in Independence. Arrangements were made, for a visit. Joseph Byron and Buddy drove to Independence to discuss possibilities. Wallace was intrigued with the idea, skeptical, but not unwilling to participate. The location was not so easily settled on—but finally Nauvoo was chosen—and the date set for mid-August. August became the traditional month for these reunions because some of the people involved were school teachers and needed it to be between school sessions.

After explaining things to me, Buddy asked if I would be willing to assist in organizing a reunion for the Smith descendants. I said I would love to; but I was expecting a baby in August, so the chances of my attending were slim. Still, I could help in the gathering of names and addresses and contacting people. I worked steadily at it from February on through April, May, and June. We had marvelous, I would say, miraculous success in gathering names and addresses for all branches of the family with living posterity.

Many of the family who were at the first reunion have passed on—I really do feel them here, in Spirit, today: We always called the elderly cousins “Aunt,” and “Uncle”, regardless of the distance of cousin-relationship. There were about 250 people in attendance; I can only name a few here--

Uncle Jay Winters Smith, Uncle David Winters Smith, Aunt sue Beatie, from Samuel's line.

From Hyrum through Joseph F. Smith, there were Willard and Florence Smith, Aunt Edith Smith Patrick, (Frances Orton's grandmother); from Hyrum's son John, Eldred and Jean Smith, his brother, Hyrum, and others.

No list would be complete without the great Smith family genealogist, Elaine Nichols!

From Katharine's line: Warren Van Dyne, and Dorothy Dean, who were great-great grandchildren of Joseph Sr., and Lucy; also Kenny Duke and his family, the Grooms, and others.

From Joseph Smith Jr., W. Wallace Smith, Lynn and Lorene Smith, their son Eric Smith and his family, Dan Larsen and his family, Anina Larsen MacKay and her family. Some of their children are now grownups who are here today.

There was no one at that time from William's posterity; now we have Gilda and David Sundeen, Gilda's daughter, Laura and her daughters! No one was found from Don Carlos, we are not sure if there are any living posterity from his line. There were none from Sophronia, as she has no living posterity. We had one from little Lucy at that time, but have since lost touch with the Milliken descendants.

Yes, I was there!

As the time drew near, I didn't know if I could go. But Buddy called me on the phone and urged me to attend. He said, "There will never be another FIRST Joseph Smith Sr., family reunion." In spite of being within three weeks of my delivery date, I traveled, from Montana, with my son Paul, to Salt Lake City, boarded the family reunion bus which drove through the night, then all day, with one stop over, to Nauvoo.

The Joy of that first reunion can hardly be expressed in words. It was wonderful. Lynn E. Smith, a grandson of David Hyrum Smith welcomed everyone and invited us to sing "Come, Come, Ye Saints." In his opening remarks, he asked, with tears in his eyes, "What took you so long?" A spirit of love and unity enveloped the entire congregation.

If I were to characterize what made that reunion happen and succeed, I would use the word SACRIFICE. I cannot relate these things without acknowledging the great sacrifices made by Joseph Byron Smith, whose enthusiasm and devotion to this work played such a great part in it happening at all. I love him for it and remember him and his sweet wife with great affection. He gave his all to help make these things begin. Likewise, Buddy Youngreen, who literally dedicated years of his life, and much of his own finances, for years, to see it happen. These two more than anyone gave heart and soul to see this work go forward. We miss them today and appreciate their great sacrifices in our behalf.

I was very pregnant during that first reunion. On the way home, at Cheyenne, Wyoming I tripped on the bus step and hopped down two steps. I went into labor, so when we arrived in Salt Lake City, I was taken to LDS Hospital where I delivered my son, David Joseph Denning, on August 23<sup>rd</sup>. He is very proud to have been born in Salt Lake City. David is turning 39 this year. I spoke with him last night on the phone and he expressed his wish that he could be here.

David is in the Air Force, preparing to be deployed for his sixth deployment, his 5<sup>th</sup> to the Middle-East. He shared a poem which he wrote for his children to help them cope with his absence when he would be gone for many months across the world from them. I think we can all sort of relate

to this poem, since we have loved being together, and we will be far from one another when we leave here.

The Distance of a Moonbeam by David Denning

Distances I have traveled  
Distances I have roamed  
My life is measured in  
Distances and time  
'til both doth bring me home.

Under the sun I do labor  
in exhaustion  
Yet, under the stars I do stare in awe--  
'Tis the moon though, that always  
Takes my tho'ts home.

For, upon every moonbeam I am reminded,  
This world, though large, is the same;  
For it be the same moonbeam  
That loved ones gaze upon  
To bring our hearts close to home.

For far too many generations a great distance had divided our Smith family. Not only a distance of miles, but a distance made almost impassible by hostility and prejudice, dividing not just the Smith family, but all parties whose origins had roots in the restoration message delivered through Joseph Smith.

In 2007, Michael Kennedy determined it was time to face some of the issues straight on; he approached the Brigham Young Family Association asking them to send someone from their organization to our family reunion and "bring a letter of apology." Of course those he approached were astounded and asked, "What for?" After discussion and consideration it seemed that what was being asked was that they help us build a bridge for this generation and future generations to cross over the gulf of misunderstanding which had separated them for so long.

Mary Ellen Elggren, president elect for the Brigham Young Association was handed the challenge. After much research, pondering and prayer she came to the moment when suddenly words began to flow into her mind and she says of that experience, "I took dictation." The letter she wrote under that influence has become known as "the Healing Letter".

This letter was accepted by Joseph and Emma's family who had gathered at Nauvoo in 2007; and has since been published far and wide throughout several publications. I will read this document here for your benefit:

June 9, 2007

“For a century and a half we have grieved over the loss of the fellowship of our dear Emma Hale Smith, her children and her descendants. We feel in our hearts an abiding longing to join once again those two families in a common celebration of their ancestors, two men who loved each other and gave their lives together in the service of the Lord, Jesus Christ. The Prophet Joseph Smith, who stands at the head of this dispensation, is second only in our affections to the Lord Himself, and we hold in the highest esteem our progenitor, Brigham Young, whose dying words in this world were the repeated name of his greatest friend and mentor, Joseph.

If there are any misunderstandings that continue to exist in the lexicon of traditions in our family concerning the Prophet’s beloved wife whom we revere as a truly great and saintly lady, we would commit ourselves to do whatever is needed to publish to the world our deep regard for her noble life. It would be our earnest desire to rebuild that bridge of friendship between our two families that existed not so long ago.”

The Healing Letter is signed by the entire board of the Brigham Young Family Association and by the leaders of the Brigham Young Granddaughters Association as well. There is a p.s. which we can share in the family that is not found in the published version of this letter: “Please accept our regrets for things past and things lost, and our hand in love and fellowship for the future where all is to be gained.”

The Smith family members present voted to accept this offering; since then it has been mailed to every family for whom we had an address. No dissenting notes have been forthcoming.

As in the beginning, the Smith Family is leading out as an example to others. The healing spirit extended through this letter seems to be permeating not only the Smith and Young families; it has become evident that there is a healing spirit moving among many families, even those who have never heard of these things, and hearts are being softened and long time differences are being healed in our time.

In the spirit of Mother Smith, who didn’t ever like to let a teaching moment go by, I cannot resist sharing the words she spoke in a Relief Society meeting in Nauvoo, “We must cherish one another; watch over one another, and gain instruction that we may all sit down in heaven together.”

I believe one of the main things we are to teach and learn through the reunions is to try to mend the rifts of the past, set them aside, and go forward. We have seen untold miracles in this aspect of the work. At a time when I was preparing to give a talk for the reunion in Kirtland in 1977, I was feeling very anxious. A very good friend, whom some of you know by name, Truman Madsen, gave me a priesthood blessing in which I was comforted by these words, which I feel strongly impressed to share with you in this sacred place—thirty-four years after they were given—for in large measure they have been fulfilled after much effort and persistence.

The blessing stated, “I feel inspired of the Lord to say to you that whatever may have occurred to split and fraction and break the bonds of love in the Joseph Smith Senior family will, in due time, be healed, overmastered, and reunited. The price in human effort is great. . . .You need have no over anxiety as you anticipate your role [in the organization of these family reunions] that your relationships

with any who are now involved or become yet involved in this movement of identify and drawing closer together the [Smith] posterity . . . that the Lord would prevent . . . any serious mistakes . . . That all eventually will work together for good.”

The key to achieving this long hoped for reuniting was also defined within the blessing, in words that I share with an uncommon urgency for us to grasp hold of and take them to heart—

“Here I am impressed to say to you that there is a fullness of the Lord’s gifts, both of the Spirit and of the priesthood, which fullness is reserved unto those who come up through affliction, who love where others would hate, who respond where others would withdraw, who endure where others would give up, who forgive and embrace when others would retaliate, and who in sum, emulate through the most profound trials the forgiving and redeeming power of the Lord Jesus Christ. “

These principles will bring family unity—a blessing that is not tied to any time or place—it is eternal, *if we choose to do the things that make it so*. Such unity is most grand when it is enjoyed in our own families—either close or extended. Such unity will imbue us with power to overcome every difficulty or trial that may be strewn in our future path.

During this reunion we have learned much of our Smith Family Heritage. As we go from this gathering, we will depart to many far flung places. May we remember the joy of being here together in this beautiful old building; and perhaps, on nights to come, we may look up at the sky and observe that the moonbeams glowing in our sky are coming from the same moon that once shown upon our ancestors, those who labored to build what we enjoy. Realize also the same moon is seen by loved ones far off, and it will be seen by our posterity when we are gone.

For, upon every moonbeam I am reminded,  
This world, though large, is the same;  
For it be the same moonbeam  
That loved ones gaze upon  
To bring our hearts close to home.

May we always remember to honor and cherish our heritage.

