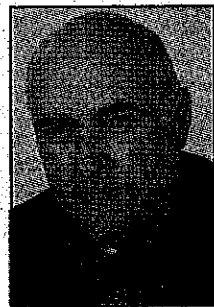


IDEALLY SPEAKING



JERRY JOHNSTON

Elder Maxwell saved my life

Once told Elder Neal A. Maxwell that I thought The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was like a John Deere tractor. It sputtered at times and threw a little oil, but it kept chugging along, bringing in the sheaves.

He thought that over a moment. "And sometimes," he said, "shocks of wheat fall off the wagon."

It was typical Elder Maxwell. I was looking for a way to excuse the church for any perceived failings.

He was looking for the souls who had fallen away.

Years ago, he looked and found me.

Along with dozens of others, I'm one of Neal A. Maxwell's "prodigals." I was floundering in the surf of the world when he beamed a light my way, extended his hand and pulled me to shore.

When I first met him I was a bit of a rounder. He was serving on the Deseret Morning News board of directors. And since we both approached the world "through language," we would sometimes meet for lunch to exchange books and metaphors. The last time my wife and I met with him, his little volume of religious thoughts had just come out. He called them "blobs" and said the book was just a "mild sedative."

"I don't know if I'll write another full-length book," he said. "My mind is like Swiss cheese. I feel like that cartoon where the doctor shines a light in the patient's left ear and you can see it shining out of the right."

He said he felt he was now "coasting in for a landing," that he could "see the rooftops" beneath him.

Thursday, we learned Elder Maxwell had finally "touched down."

Much has been said and written about his life in the past couple of days. Much more will be said and written. Everyone has his own version of him. I always saw him as a consecrated soul. Many promise to consecrate their time and talents to God. But more than anyone I've known, Elder Maxwell did just that. He gave the impression that his intellect, energy and wit belonged to God. He seemed to embody a short prayer uttered by Saint Augustine:

"Lord, let me offer you in sacrifice the service of my thoughts and my tongue; but first, give me what I may offer you."

That was how Elder Maxwell thought and lived.

As for all those hours he spent with me, I have no idea why I was singled out for such a blessing. I feel like the construction worker named Terry who visited the paper to talk about heart transplants. He'd received an implanted defibrillator. When that failed, he applied for and got a new heart. He was doing very well.

"I know you're asking, 'Why this guy?'" Terry said. "I ask myself that every day. I'm nobody special. I have no idea why God has granted me such favors."

Personally, I think God granted Terry such favors to show that he loves every favor equally. It wasn't that Terry was "nobody special." It was that, in God's eyes, everybody is special. When it came to transplanting hearts, God didn't play favorites.

That was how Elder Neal A. Maxwell made people feel. There were no kings and paupers in his world, no castes or classes. There were only pilgrims — some who'd found their way, some who hadn't.

I was a wandering pilgrim when he first met me.

Without a second thought, he took me by the hand.

And with that simple gesture, he saved my life.

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