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Elder Maxwell: writer, poet

LDS apostle says there's still room to improve his work

By Dennis Lythgoe
Deseret News book editor

Elder Neal A. Maxwell, an apostle in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints since 1981, is often referred to as "the poet of the General Authorities." That is because he has written more than 30 books about gospel-related subjects, all of which are carefully molded by his well-known love of language. Besides his poetic prose, he also writes poetry.

Now the tables have been turned. Bruce C. Hafen has written "A Disciple's Life," a careful and candid biography of Elder Maxwell.

During a Deseret News interview in his office in the LDS Church Administration Building, Elder Maxwell was self-effacing about the book, his own literary abilities and humbled by his own recent suffering. With a twinkle in his eye, he said, "I think I needed to get my ticket punched. I had written about human suffering, so the question

was, 'Can you handle the lab work?' So I see it as a natural follow-on that probably had to happen."

Elder Maxwell received the devastating diagnosis of leukemia in the fall of 1996 at the age of 70. "I was in the hospital 46 days for extensive chemotherapy, then had two follow-up chemos; then I had a remission that lasted 15 months. Then it came back.

"Usually, you don't get a second remission with leukemia, particularly at my age, and if you do, it doesn't last very long. I'm still running on my second remission, approximately four years, and I don't know how long it will last. It's been a mentoring experience, and a necessary one for me, so I could move from some abstract understanding of suffering to something more personal."

Elder Maxwell's health today is good enough that he plays tennis, even though he no longer "dives for the ball."

He believes his "delay en route" might make his writing "more authentic." And he says he still



Bruce C. Hafen has written a new biography of Elder Neal A. Maxwell.

finds the apostleship intimidating, especially since he feels constrained "to minister to individuals and not just to do my institutional duties."

Elder Maxwell freely admits to human weaknesses. The family remembers one time when he was a child, he was walking to church with his mother when he complained, "Church, church, church — all we do is go to church! When I

grow up I'm not going to church any more!" As a Scout, he hated the program so much, especially tying knots, that he dropped out as a tenderfoot.

As a college student, he went to see Elder Harold B. Lee, then an apostle, to complain about the quality of church manuals. He calls that act "audacious" now, but says Elder Lee listened to him with patience. "That tendency to steady the ark is not completely suppressed. But maybe if I try to steady the ark, it's because I care so much about the ark."

Please see **MAXWELL** on E3

Apostle's bio good reading

By Dennis Lythgoe
Deseret News book editor

A DISCIPLE'S LIFE: THE BIOGRAPHY OF NEAL A. MAXWELL by Bruce C. Hafen, Deseret Book, 631 pages, \$29.95.

When Elder Neal Maxwell asked Bruce Hafen to write his biography, he requested that it not be "a bloated résumé." Hafen, a member of the LDS First Quorum of the Seventy, accepted the challenge, then produced a distinguished book that is unusually candid.

In fact, it compares favorably to Edward and Andrew Kimball's biography of President Spencer W. Kimball, up until now probably the single best biography of an LDS Church leader.

Hafen carefully exam-

Please see **BIOGRAPHY** on E3

BIOGRAPHY

Continued from E1

ines Elder Maxwell's unorthodox career, from his acne-plagued boyhood through his 21-year tenure as an astute apostle and his singular, so far successful battle with leukemia.

The book is unfailingly interesting, in part because of the author's writing ability and in part because the subject is so witty and multifaceted. Hafen portrays a charismatic man who is intellectually gifted, diverse, gregarious and humble, yet one who all his life has fought a tendency to "steady the ark" and to pursue perfection to the point of impatience.

His favorite phrase has been, "Let's get this show on the road!"

Elder Maxwell is shown to be a gifted writer, if a bit pedantic and "flowery" for some LDS members. The bottom line is that he is also a human being with whom we all identify because we share in his human failings.

Hafen traces Elder Maxwell's career from assistant to

U.S. Senator Wallace Bennett through 14 different positions at the University of Utah in 14 years. He was U. executive vice president when he was called on to be LDS Church Commissioner of Education, a job he loved.

Finally, he was called to be a member of the LDS Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, an assignment in which he has excelled. Hafen tells the story of a man who has constantly reached out to others while writing about human suffering—only to be stricken himself.

In his first General Conference talk following his first remission in 1997, Elder Maxwell joked about his chemo-induced bald pate and

expressed gratitude "for the comforter in the midnight moments." He added, "Those who emerge successfully from their varied and fiery furnaces have experienced the grace of the Lord, which he says is sufficient."

"Even so . . . such emerging individuals do not rush to line up in front of another fiery furnace in order to get an extra turn!"

E-MAIL: dennis@desnews.com

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Elder Neal Maxwell

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The new biography of Neal A. Maxwell is a great book that is unusually candid, sharing stories about his boyhood to his battle with leukemia.

MAXWELL

Continued from E1

Elder Maxwell has always had an interest in politics, and he taught political science at the University of Utah. In the 1960s, he was considered by many to be a strong candidate for the U.S. Senate. "But the opportunity came up just as the fire in my belly went down. I still follow politics very carefully, but I don't have the full freedoms of the First Amendment. So I murmur privately sometimes."

He is a "binge reader" who reads several books at the same time, most recently David McCullough's biography of John Adams. One of his favorite writers is C.S. Lewis, "but the scriptures always come first."

As an apostle, he has not been "listened to all the time" — and he is glad about that, because he likes to be "tutored."

Elder Maxwell is particularly humble about his writing: "Writing is a narcotic, and I don't know what to do about that. My writing has been too pedantic. It isn't good enough yet. Some people say they need a dictionary to follow my writing, but I don't use big words."

"I think what they're saying is that I compress things so that there isn't time to get a breath between thoughts. So that's a weakness, but I will keep writing because the ideas come and I need to put them down, even if they don't turn out well."

E-MAIL: dennis@desnews.com

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