

Part III – The Goodness of the Nation

"If men were angels, no government would be necessary."

— James Madison, fourth President of the United States

TWENTIETH-CENTURY MORMONS saw a trajectory from a disreputable cult to a respectable church. With polygamy behind them, they believed their virtues were what America wanted — hard work, reliability, self-discipline and a good moral character. They reformulated their romance of heaven and earth to harmonize with the nation. They could be good Americans — only less sinful.

“There shall none come into this land save they shall be brought by the hand of the Lord. Wherefore, this land is consecrated unto him whom he shall bring, it shall be a land of liberty unto them ...”

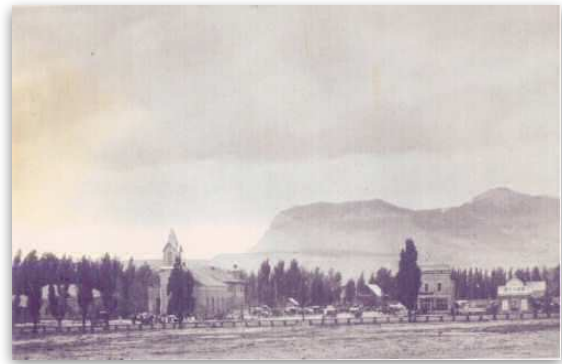
—Book of Mormon

And why not? That was how my father saw it. America was our land, after all, consecrated by God for the restoration of the “true gospel” (the Nephites were all dead and the Lamanites, dispersed as Indians, had forgotten their history). He sent chosen people here to occupy the continent — Columbus, the religiously unhappy, freedom-seekers, the Founding Fathers. They were all “men raised up,” linked in their callings to lay the groundwork for Joseph Smith to learn a continent’s true history and become a prophet who tried to show the world its future. But there were signs of America’s decay. We had been warned, this had been prophesied and the *Book of Mormon* pointed to the collapse of civilizations and destruction of cities. A godly household would need to be a moral barricade.

Making Good in America

IN MY GROWING UP YEARS in the 1950s the generations of my family had mostly stayed put. They were a stratigraphy of Latter-day Saints, like the layers of red, pink, white, brown, green and mauve that made up the fins, arches, hoodoos, mesas and canyons of the desert country. Rather than geologic epochs of ancient seas and sand dune deserts, they revealed a human history of “God’s country,” as grandpa Will called it. You could understand a layer by knowing the conditions when it formed.

Most of the grandparents were children of original settlers. They were the tail end of an old way of being Mormon. They had to adapt to a different narrative when some of the old myths and aspects of their history presented challenges — like polygamy and the defiant theocracy of Brigham. They thought of themselves as the sturdy foundation for whatever could be salvaged of Zion as Joseph and Brigham envisioned it. They settled in for the long haul to be a community that would survive *in* America, not *apart* from it.



THE TOWN (CIRCA 1905)

They proved to be resilient and adaptable. They learned to inhabit secular and religious communities simultaneously because that was the way the world worked. They made a twentieth-century economy from semi-arid farms, livestock, coal mines, small businesses and public service, with little cash and lots of ingenuity. When Gentiles (still anyone not a Mormon) moved in for the cheap federal land and its minerals — uranium, vanadium, copper and coal — the grandparents were outnumbered for a time. But they maintained the boundaries of a chosen people, socially if not physically, until things swung back in their favor.

The Great Depression came to families already hit hard by tough years and drought. It got worse. They sheared their sheep but there was no market for wool, the prices for coal fell and so did work in the mines. The government, the old nemesis of Zion, the ones who sent the federal agents of “the Raid” to our towns, came again. This time they put men to work, not in jail. Women and children gladly worked on community improvement projects in exchange for groceries.

The Civilian Conservation Core (CCC) brought young men to build a bridge, a courthouse, roads and irrigation projects. They fought the biggest forest fire anyone had seen. Romances with local women flourished and some became marriages. More than of third of the families went on public assistance and two-thirds of the county registered to vote as Democrats.



CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORE (1936)

Grandpa Will, the son of a Scottish coal miner, was already a Democrat. He knew the life of coal camps — Greeks, Italians, Finns, a few radical socialists — before going to Chicago for a law degree. He had progressives views and a hope for easier times. “I voted for Roosevelt every time.”

“If the town had been swept by fire it would not have had a more disastrous effect upon the inhabitants living there. The whistle just blew, and they had no home, no job, and no place to go.”

— journal from my grandparent’s generation, recalling the Great Depression

Grandma Clara, the Danish branch of the family, was also hopeful for easier times. She lost her husband, our first U.S. Forest Ranger, to a heart attack. She told me stories of the hard times. The influenza panic when she volunteered to help the only doctor in the county by visiting the sick women day and night until she knew who would live and who would die. And the whooping cough “that took every baby in town except for two girls, and they grew up deaf and dumb from it.” There was the time Aunt Bessie nearly lost three toes when she and uncle Neil were too playful and careless while he chopped firewood. Grandma wrapped the dangling toes in a cloth. Bessie’s baby sister had the whooping cough, so the toes had wait for “surgical aid” until the baby could be buried.

And she was proud that when the second world war came Bessie was “one of the young women at the train station” who saw the new soldiers off with smiles and smalls gifts, “cookies, doughnuts, cantaloupes, watermelons, chewing gum, and even liquor and cigarettes if that was their liking.” Bessie joined the war herself as a Red Cross volunteer and met her husband, a young soldier who was good at engineering, so good that General Electric hired him after the war to make jet engines and new airplanes. “He’s not a member of the church,” grandma would say, “but he’s a good man and they’ve made a good life.” They lived in California, where we assumed there were no hard times.

So far as I can tell, three beliefs about how to be in the world steadied their generation through hard times and prosperity. The most important was that God continued to communicate and intervene in human affairs. Revelations were available to each succeeding prophet, who was, without exception, the next church president. A prophet in communication with God and the *Book of Mormon* were evidence that theirs was a “true gospel.”



A WORK CAMP DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Revelation established the lines of authority in an authoritarian church. Anyone had “the right to receive revelations concerning your own duties,” but no right to declare the word of God. But revelation also provided the flexibility to be in a social world where change was inevitable. An active line of communication with God could be an occasion to back off, change direction and adapt to different social contexts and goals. Revelations had come as needed to keep Mormons from being a peculiar frontier cult that disappeared into history.

A second was the Gospel of Works. Their good works would be rewarded on earth, often with material improvements in their situation. When someone moved from a farm to the center of the town it was usually to have a bigger and nicer house. It was a sign of a being blessed. It was the old Puritan notion of providential blessings, another way God intervened in human affairs. The more blessed you were the more likely you would be elevated to leadership in the local congregation. Good works dovetailed two myths: Joseph’s cosmology of eternal progress toward a heaven where we would be graded according to our works and America’s idea of progress and meritocracy as how the world should work.

Lastly there was public good. Mormons were the most cooperative settlers in the West, and still cooperating. The welfare of our community was essential to political and economic stability. They were expected to devote time to a common purpose, and households should contribute a part of their income to the church. For Grandpa Will, the Rooseveltian Democrat in the family, public good was a fundamental principle of Republicanism and extending it to the nation posed no conflict with Mormonism. Not everyone in town, including my father, was so sunny about the public good of government planning and interventions in the social fabric.

Prophets, Principles and National Survival

THE GENERATION OF MY PARENTS was a strata folded — and in some places forever altered — by the whiplash of disparate eras of promise and peril. The eras came with almost breathtaking speed. The Machine Age promised a future of power and speed. The Great Depression darkened that future until the World of Tomorrow promised a new horizon of technologies and products for a happy and abundant life. World War II set that promise aside while everyone united against a common enemy in the moral clarity of a “Good War.” Victory renewed a sunny optimism about the world’s greatest economy, but the specter of a mushroom cloud from the most destructive weapon ever known darkened it.

My parents watched the country’s Great Barbecue of self-indulgence (I watched on one of millions of television sets appearing in TV rooms, a new space in the American home). New ages kept coming fast: Atomic Age, Television Age, Sputnik and the Space Race. Theology had a hard time keeping up, especially one that was as conservative and literal-minded as ours.

Things had taken my father by surprise. It was in his eyes. They seemed to be in a permanent state of startle, and not entirely certain about what they were seeing. He had wanted to see an everlasting America of Norman Rockwell and Norman Vincent Peale. Framed prints of Rockwell’s “Four Freedoms” hung in our house and *The Power of Positive Thinking* was almost doctrinal for him. Like Peale, he believed religion was a means to a successful and fulfilling life. The America he got was in a Cold War, a final eschatological battle, he believed, between forces of good and forces of evil. Civilization itself at stake. He must have been worried.



THE SOVIET UNION LAUNCHED SPUTNIK IN OCTOBER, 1957

***“Pity the nation that raises not its voice
except to praise conquerors and
acclaim the bully as hero
and aims to rule the world with force
and by torture.”***

—“Pity The Nation,” Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Joseph had prophesied it: one day America and its Constitution would “hang by a single thread,” and “this people will step forth and save it from destruction.” My father believed the destructive force was communism. “A division of the church of the devil, and we’re not being told the truth,” he cautioned. Socialist tendencies were running mad with no countervailing force in sight. As it had been in the time of Nephites and Lamanites, society was failing. “The hand of the Lord founded this country. He’ll withdraw that hand if we continue to fail in righteousness,” he warned us. If prophesy was to be believed, a decidedly undemocratic church would be called on to defend democracy. So far as I could tell, no one saw any irony in that.



“The war in heaven is raging on the earth today. Are you being neutralized in the battle?”

— Ezra Taft Benson, Mormon apostle and Church President

The fundamental problem with communism was that it quashed “free agency,” the divine right to choose interwoven into every life. Agency was central to Joseph’s plan of salvation as a journey of the soul. It stood to reason that free agency had to be protected in order for there to be a “land of opportunity.” My father was encouraged that we had a man in the White House. His name was Ezra Taft Benson, a leading authority in our faith, and later a president of the church. President Eisenhower made him the Secretary of Agriculture even though Benson disliked the agency he was asked to administer (there really wasn’t a government agency that he *did* like). Government planning was crushing individualism and would lead inexorably to totalitarian control. It was nearly as big a threat as communism.

Expectations of the Second Coming have always included suspicions about the world and misgivings about science, government and culture. For Mormons, that included the many criticisms of their account of the past. Nevertheless, church leaders were convinced that theology and politics could be harmonized, even in the new world order of the Cold War. It was more easily done as conservatives than as liberals, and without making it quite doctrinal they made that clear. Except for grandpa Will, my family and most of the people I knew took that to heart. A county that had registered as Democrats during the hard times and federal relief of the 1930s changed its mind and registered as Republicans, and took a dimmer view of the world.

THE HISTORY OF A DIM FUTURE was already written. “This is a sign, that ye may know the time,” was in the *Book of Mormon*. There would be specific signs before the end of the world (by then, it was widely expected in most of America since there was now a world-ending technology). My father’s world view was well-suited to pamphlets, and he made sure I had the church pamphlets that divided the signs into three groups: Has Happened, Are Happening and Will Happen.

“One day a member of the church will make president” was a Will Happen sign for which he was particularly eager. It was his best hope for a government that could be trusted. Grandma Jane was also hopeful about that day, “I’ll look down on it from heaven.” Another hopeful sign was that “missionaries will have taken the gospel to all parts of the world,” after which we would finally acquire that Garden of Eden property in Missouri and “Israel shall be gathered with power.”

They both agreed there were ominous signs, “upheavals of the elements, and angels will prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.” As I understood it, this would be mostly natural disasters and famines on every continent, and then conspiracies (my father put these in the Are Happening category), social upheavals and wars. Prophets would lie dead in the streets of Jerusalem. The disasters and calamities were a little scary, but the dead prophets, as I said earlier, were downright creepy. But that might encourage Jews to join us in Missouri, I thought.

It was like a post-apocalyptic and post-eschatological narrative where the current order is reversed. Organized society goes from decadence to debauchery and finally destruction. The mythical times of wilderness are made to come back. I imagined our small town would lose contact when atomic bombs exploded on the horizon. With every report of a new war, or threat of war, anywhere in the world I wondered if the end was beginning. How dangerous was it going to be?



“For the moment we live in a day of peace and prosperity but it shall not ever be thus. Great trials lie ahead. All of the sorrows and perils of the past are but a foretaste of what is yet to be.”

— Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon apostle in the 1950s

It always came down to wars: the great war in heaven, the ancient wars of the *Book of Mormon* and now this Cold War. If a final millennial war was to be waged between America and communism — a war that would actually end all wars by ending everything — and if we were to be instruments in the hand of God then we might be like the Nephite warriors, standing for the light against the dark.

That scenario would need to be adjusted for a high-stakes struggle where technology — things and machines — had become a source of power. God could be expected to provide a weapon. There was speculation that the Bomb might be that weapon, that it was actually salvational. It was, after all, infinitely more powerful than the humans who invented it and had acquired a kind of omniscience. Mutually assured destruction meant we were in the hands of God or “the experts,” and maybe they were not so different in perilous times.

I tried to make sense of that and ponder the fragility of civilizations, a major theme of the *Book of Mormon*. A handful of men with a handful of weapons could create a world of the dead. I wondered if I would argue for continued existence when faced with the End Times as a nuclear cataclysm. I tried being in charge of it with my plastic model of a B-29 bomber, a detailed replica of the *Enola Gay* that flew over Hiroshima to deliver the first cataclysm. The tiny bomb bay opened and I could insert two plastic atomic bombs.



SECOND ALLEGORY (CIRCA 1948)
BEN SHAHN, AMERICAN ARTIST

“How much of this are we to believe, when with the pride of Lucifer, the recklessness of Icarus, the boldness of Prometheus and the intellectual curiosity of Adam and Eve ... man has obviously outreached himself, to the point where he cannot understand his own science or control his own inventions. Indeed he has become as the gods who have over and over again suffered defeat and downfall at the hands of their creatures.”

— *The Future is Now*, Katherine Anne Porter

MR. SWINBURNE, the science teacher in my school, never tried to worry us about the Bomb or the end of the world. He was a Presbyterian, and not bound by our apocalyptic reconciliation of theology and Cold War politics. Missionaries from the Presbytery had come fifty years ago to build a church, noting that our “communities are Mormon through and through but are generally of a more liberal type.”

Mr. Swinburne was a holdover from the Progressive era, and believed we were enjoying fruit borne from it. He saw a future of democracy and international cooperation through science. He wanted us to understand everything was changing: the nature of war and peace, work, education and science. Our place in the world was changing. A small town in Utah may be just a speck on the horizon of that change, but it was my horizon now.

He told us to watch Walt Disney’s *The Atom is Your Friend* on TV. Walt spoke to us from the World of Tomorrowland and told us there was nothing to fear, “The atom is our future.” It had a story that “is almost like a fairy tale.” A scientist from another country explained the story of the atom and demonstrated a nuclear chain reaction using mouse traps and ping pong balls. Mr. Swinburne gave half of us in the classroom small rubber balls with strings attached, which we threw in any direction. The balls collided, crossed strings and whirled randomly in the air. I suppose it was the best he could do to demonstrate a chain reaction, but he wanted us to begin to appreciate the perspective of a scientist.

Another time he showed us a series of short films, *Magic of the Atom*. They were produced by the government and showed us all the good things atomic energy would make possible now that science understood it better. It would improve medicine, industry, farming and crops, and maybe even improve the weather. We might one day live in atomic cities and be atomic detectives with our own geiger counters.

“Some people (usually, though not always, older people) find in new discoveries — and atomic energy in particular — a cause for the deepest despair ... it’s not uncommon to hear predictions that the end of civilization is near at hand. But I doubt that young people will take much stock in these predictions of dire and utter calamity.”

— David Lilienthal, Atomic Energy Commission chairman (1948)

Slipping Away

IN THE 1950s our county newspaper, optimistically called *The Progress*, published a series of articles titled "He Made Good." They were accounts of those who had left to make good as lawyers, doctors, engineers, businessmen, professors, economists, geologists, government officials and even musicians. One was among the original animators at the Disney studios referred to as the "Nine Old Men" (the prince in *The Little Mermaid* was named in his memory). What seemed clear was that you had to go somewhere else to make good — probably a city.

It used to be that people slipped way through the exportation of labor, which is the natural cycle of small communities. After the war it was often big industries. Uncle Neil, who almost cut off aunt Bessie's toes, "moved to Montana to work in copper," as grandma put it. Bessie and her G.I husband followed General Electric and federal defense dollars to California. Now it was the era of education, and going to a university was likely to be how you slipped away.

WE WERE "BABY BOOMERS," the most educated generation in our rural bit of Zion. Our education was supposed to strengthen our consonance with America, assimilate us into a middle class that still bore the marks of duty, exertion and effort. As the modern Mormon youth culture we were expected to maintain a high moral character and be a personal Zion wherever we went — "Every member a missionary" was one of my father's favorite homilies. Education was our opportunity to plant the flag of Mormonism in America. We would stay in the cities where we were educated, find work, marry and start a family. We would be the seeds of "a growing LDS community." A few of us were pessimistic about finding a comfortable consonance with America of the 1960s, and not for the reasons our parents and grandparents were growing uneasy.

"When we were kids the United States was the wealthiest and strongest country in the world; the only one with the atom bomb, the least scarred by modern war, an initiator of the United Nations that we thought would distribute Western influence throughout the world ... As we grew, however, our comfort was penetrated by events too troubling to dismiss.

— "Port Huron Statement: Agenda for a Generation," Students for a Democratic Society

My father beamed when he talked about David O. McKay, our charismatic church president (the first since Joseph to not wear a beard). McKay had been on the cover of *Time* and was friends with Cecil B. DeMille, who consulted with him about the production of *The Ten Commandments*. To my father's delight, he was staunchly anti-communist. He considered it atheistic to the core.

“McKay is an affable new image of Mormonism to a world that had previously seen Mormon leaders as dour, dark-suited figures.”

— *Time* (1955)

McKay had ideas about being Mormon in the mid-twentieth century. The key was reverence, and the key to being a good Mormon in the world was to embrace it, not fear it. We should be engaged in the world and, at all times, display respectability, rectitude and moral character in our lives (“every member a missionary”). We should value competence, hard work and respect. McKay made himself comfortable with actors, presidents, publicity and traveling the world. He wrote a book, *Secrets of Happy Life*, which my father put next to *The Power of Positive Thinking*. The 1950s were supposed to be a sunny time for Mormons in America.

But there were signs of trouble. A storm was coming, you might say. Prosperity had been the naked ambition of a growing economy. Everyday technology brought better washing machines, refrigerators and new gizmos for home and office that would ensure rising happiness for everybody, with no end in sight. But for many of the kids, happiness wasn't rising. They turned away from conformity and “grey flannel suits.” Magazines started to write words like “alienated.” America had its first real youth culture on its hands. Television sets and rock and roll music were in nearly every home. Elvis Presley changed our idea of music. James Dean and Jack Kerouac and others shifted popular culture toward the notion that you could be anything you wanted to be — or die trying.



REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE (1955)

“How can a guy grow up in a circus like this?”

— James Dean as Jim Stark in *Rebel Without a Cause*

Science fiction films took space travel, alien invasion and apocalypse by way of nuclear holocaust for granted. They were spectacles of disaster (I was a reliable fan). A common denominator was the destruction of organized society — or the very real threat of that. The hero, who was usually a scientist, and heroine, his wife or his girlfriend, struggle against outside threats (aliens, zombies and false Americans as stand-ins for communists). Americanness becomes a handful of people or a small community maintaining freedom from oppressors. With society in disarray, it's back to a new kind of frontier for the survivors to find purification. You've seen it (without the communists) in contemporary futuristic science fiction. Surely by now you can see how the Bomb, the destruction of cities and civilizations and the fate of Nephite warriors were tricky for me.

Anti-communism led to conspiracy theories and McCarthyism. Richard Nixon ended the 1950s in a ridiculous debate with Nikita Khrushchev in a model kitchen of American appliances and a woman in a dress, heels and apron. He told Nikita that America would bury him in consumer products.

People started to notice problems with civil rights — "the good life" had not ended class and racial differences. If happiness wasn't really rising for us white kids it certainly wasn't rising for black and brown people. Rosa Parks objected, Martin Luther King led boycotts and marches, and we all saw bloodied heads and police dogs on TV. Cities started to burn in rage. My father reminded me of that pamphlet and Will Happen, but I wasn't listening anymore.

I started to notice things. I liked the music, the movies took a little longer. I had to wait for college to read Kerouac and imagine those two guys on the road who circle endlessly and never find the center of America. And I was having grave doubts about foreign wars and the whole New Frontier sham. As I said earlier, there was a lot for a conservative faith like ours to take in. The turbulence of the 1960s suggested that America might be slipping away.



THE KITCHEN DEBATE (1959)

***“Freedom is something people take,
and people are as free as they want to
be.”***

— *Notes of a Native Son*, James Baldwin

IT'S FAMILY HOME EVENING, the weekly ritual when faithful Mormons in a godly household set aside time to confirm essential religious principles for their children. My family is right to be nervous. I've displayed wayward tendencies: joining the school debate club to argue against the Vietnam War, arguing with my father about his affinity for the John Birch Society, listening to rock and roll and consorting with bad company in the railroad town. I've grown resentful of being threatened with the consequences of my desires and the possible pleasures of life. They must be thinking this is a chance to be the moral barricade the family is supposed to be. They're like a family chorus.

“The abandoned, the devastated, was the profound experience — clearly family life was only temporary.”

— “They All Just Went Away,” Joyce Carol Oates

The startle is still in my father's eyes. “You can intellectualize your way around anything and think you're elevating yourself. But the prophet and the spirit of the Holy Ghost will never lead you astray. I hope you'll remember that.”

Grandma Jane hasn't changed her glasses or her opinions in years. The glasses are angled on her nose, one eye looking through the lens, the other over the top. It's her moral gaze. “The spirit can't survive with one foot in the Church and the other in the World. Don't go choosing the learning of the World over the learning of the Lord.”

She always enunciates consequential realms of heaven and earth with a capital letter: the “World,” the “Cities,” which are mostly “dens of iniquity,” and the “Kingdom,” which is always God's whether on earth or in heaven. It's how she draws sharp edges.

My father continues, “The pull of the world is strong, and its arguments can be clever. But study of the revealed gospel will improve us quicker than the study of all this controversial news of the day.” At the first sign of what he considers too much reflection he always emphasizes revelation and the exceptional nature of our gospel.

“If young people cared less about all this political radicalism and kept to our principles they'd not be sliding out of the Kingdom on a board,” grandma Jane continues. “There's too much today that's simply not aligned with the Lord's plan.

Studying the Word has a better effect upon the minds of young people.” Again, I can hear the capital letter. She’s alarmed by cultural encroachments.

Maybe from their vantage point it was us kids of the 1950s that were picking the fight in the 1960s. It’s true, some of us started to boil over, got tired of being citizens by being consumers, our democratic choices exercised by buying and selling. We’re tired of competition and efficiency as defining characteristics of human relations. I’ve been over to the railroad town where the movie theater showed a new film, *The Graduate*. I was as unconvinced as Dustin Hoffman by the middle-aged man who tells him, “One word: *plastics*.” And I’m really pissed at the Vietnam War and the whole “best and brightest” approach to the world.

*“Short pants, romance
Learn to dance, get dressed, get blessed
Try to be a success
Please her, please him, buy gifts
Don't steal, don't lift
Twenty years of schoolin'
And they put you on the day shift
Look out kid
They keep it all hid”*

— “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” Bob Dylan

Why in god’s name did I bring up the war? We’ve already argued about this too many times. My father bristles and defends it. “You may not like it, but if it opens up another country and lets our missionaries in, then the Lord is guiding it.”

Grandpa Will is still a Democrat, probably to the consternation of his wife. I suspect — at least I hope — he has his doubts about *this* war. “Just be careful that some damn foolish thing you do doesn’t lead to even more foolishness,” is his only counsel. He still has faith in human capacity.

Grandma Clara never takes a side in politics and she’s clearly uncomfortable. She’s the storyteller of the family, more inclined toward simple anecdotes that make the best of things. “Of course the children are going to want to leave. There’s nothing new in that. Not much of a place for them in the world today without college.” She’s proud of her oldest daughter, my mother, for going to college. “And I can tell you, I don’t remember ever having to remind your mother to do her homework.”

My mother is also proud. “You took us out to the garden and assigned each of us what to do. There was no play until the assignments were done, even cleaning the chicken coop, which I really hated, and we knew that. That’s why the homework always got done.”

She tells me one of her favorite college stories, which I've heard before. "I was so poor the elastic in my worn-out underpants broke one day when I was walking across campus, fell straight down to my ankles. I was humiliated but didn't miss class."

"It was one of the best times of my life," she continues. "I used to walk around whenever I could. It was so green there, with big trees on every street, and the parks. Oh, I loved the parks. I loved to see spring turn the city green."

My father tries to bring the conversation back to what he believes should be its purpose. "Never in the history of the world have so many of God's children had the opportunity to enjoy the sacred materials as they do now. We have a responsibility to learn to use what our Heavenly Father has given us in a proper manner."

I'm not really listening. He doesn't understand that it's the wonder in the weave of America I want to know about. There will be a lot of threads to pull on, some of them bright, some dark. I'll do that most American of things — move a thousand miles and try to become a different thing. It's one of our oldest stories.

A week or so before this Family Home Evening, Mr. Swinburne, the teacher who showed us a clumsy demonstration of nuclear chain reactions, was at my high school graduation ceremony. He had been promoted, and was looking forward to his first year as a high school science teacher. There's gray in his hair but he's wearing better-looking glasses. He congratulated me on the college scholarship and assured me, "You'll find a place in the world. I'm sure you'll make a contribution."

"Exactly like history, stories accumulate and drive us toward being what we are ... they tell us to go toward possibility."

— William Kittredge

I had already closed my eyes and seen a bow launch an arrow that becomes several arrows, that become shooting stars and finally a shower of snowflakes. They were falling on the goodness of the nation.