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John W. Welch: A Personal Reminiscence

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JOHN W. WELCH: A PERSONAL REMINISCENCE

Stephen E. Robinson

Abstract: *In these glimpses of the early private life of a very public figure, Stephen E. Robinson provides a portrait that will enable readers to see how the child became father to the man.*

[**Editor's Note:** Part of our book chapter reprint series, this article is reprinted here as a service to the LDS community. Original pagination and page numbers have necessarily changed, otherwise the reprint has the same content as the original.

See Stephen E. Robinson, "John W. Welch: A Personal Reminiscence," in *"To Seek the Law of the Lord": Essays in Honor of John W. Welch*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 1–8. Further information at <https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/to-seek-the-law-of-the-lord-essays-in-honor-of-john-w-welch-2/>.]

John Woodland Welch (Jack) has been my friend and colleague for more than 65 years, since we attended the same Junior Sunday School and Primary in the old La Cañada Ward of the Glendale Stake in Los Angeles, California. Jack is a year older than I am so sometimes we were in the same church class or quorum, and sometimes not. My first distinct memory of Jack is from our Blazer class at Primary. I realized at a young age, what I would come to realize again and again many times since, that Jack already knew all about "stuff." In that first case, it was all the Scout stuff, which had remained largely a mystery to me. Our Blazer leader, Paul Griffen, finally got me to learn the Scout Oath and a little more, but Jack almost a year earlier had memorized it *all*: the Oath, the Motto, the Law, and all the paragraphs in the Scout

Handbook pertaining to each. It was a precedent to be repeated over and over again in my experience with Jack as we grew up.

Jack and I were blessed with remarkably good ward leaders and teachers. Our early morning Seminary teacher, Sister Elaine Walton, once said she expected our class to produce bishops, stake presidents, and even *more*. I remember as she finished her sentence that her eyes were resting on Jack. I also believe her feelings on that occasion have proved to be prophetic.

Under the tutelage of that greatest of all Scoutmasters, Cy Watson, Jack quickly became an Eagle Scout. I remember from our days at Cherry Valley and other Scout camps that Jack was a decent shot, but a superb swimmer. Also, I do not remember him ever having to “hold up trees” on any of our frequent Scout outings—a punishment sometimes meted out to the many ruffians among us. Finally, a few years later, Jack and I were blessed to attend a Sunday School class taught by a very young Richard Callister, brother to Elder Tad R. Callister of the Seventy. Those were glorious Sundays, even for us teenagers. Brother Callister’s grandfather, Elder LeGrand Richards, occasionally attended our ward and always addressed the congregation when he did. The deacons, teachers, and priests sat in the front of the chapel and were privileged to hear that grand old man preach the Gospel up close. All in all, I believe Jack’s adolescent experiences and training in the La Cañada Ward provided a “perfect storm” of influence and support to aid him in achieving his magnificent future accomplishments.

As a youth, I remember going to the beach with Jack and his family. I recall being *hugely* (though silently) impressed that the chatter in the back of the station wagon was about music and literature as much if not more than the usual teenage trivia and sibling bickering one might expect. I was often a guest at the Welch family swimming pool, either alone or with others in our ward. However, my most vivid memories of Jack during our teenage years are mostly connected to the High Sierra Mountains, for which Jack and I share a particular love—especially the John Muir Trail and the wild areas adjacent to it.

It was in the High Sierras that I first really encountered Jack’s more spiritual side when, quite unintentionally, he taught me the meaning of the Sabbath Day. One summer in the early 1960s, Jack, his brother James, and I, together with our fathers backpacked into the Hilton Lakes for an extended weekend fishing trip. The company and the fishing were fine, and the mountains were magnificent. But on Sunday morning after breakfast, as my father and I were rigging up our poles for the day’s

fishing, the Welches all found comfortable logs or stones to sit on and began to study their scriptures.

“Aren’t you guys fishing?” I asked with amazement.

“No,” Jack replied quietly. “Not on Sunday.”

None of the Welches said anything else, and there was no hint of censure or judgment in their demeanor. Even so, the damage was done—the seed had been planted. In succeeding years as I sought the Lord somewhat more diligently, when planning my weekends I would sometimes hear again Jack’s quiet, “No, not on Sunday.” To this day I am grateful.

I believe a major key to understanding John Woodland Welch lies in the architecture of the church building he worshiped in as a young man. The wall behind the pulpit in the La Cañada Chapel contains a large and beautiful stained glass window. In the center panel the Savior stands holding a lantern by a garden door. The left-hand panel depicts an open scroll labeled “the Stick of Judah,” while the right hand panel displays a similar scroll identified as “the Stick of Joseph.” In almost every church meeting of his early life, as Jack listened to the speakers and partook of the Sacrament, he saw before him the Savior of the world flanked on the left and on the right by the scrolls of Judah and Joseph in glorious stained glass. By the time he was an adult, that theme had been firmly stamped upon his mind and heart. That stained glass window is certainly a fitting icon to represent Jack’s eventual contributions to the study of the scrolls—not only the stick of Judah and the stick of Joseph, but of many other scrolls as well—all in the service of the Lord. I privately suspect that even the initial impulse to create the Foundation of Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) can be found somewhere in that wonderful stained glass.

In our youth, Jack often intimidated me (as he does anyone with intelligence). I was never able to beat him at *anything* (except, perhaps, at football—which doesn’t count for much in academic circles). I remember once in high school bragging to Jack about what I thought was a very good SAT score. He granted that it was indeed a fine score, but when I strongly pressed him to tell me what *he* had scored on the same exam, he admitted finally to having earned a perfect 1600! In the fifty years since then, I have only personally known two other people who have accomplished this seeming impossibility. In many ways, Jack was my Socratic gadfly—often to my consternation—urging me on to attempt and achieve more in school than I might have undertaken without his example to follow. Neither of my own parents had attended college, and

I had no other role models; however, in academics, as in Scouting, I was aware early on that Jack already knew “stuff.”

In fact, it was Jack and his father, also named John W. Welch, who initiated me into my first serious academic study of religion in general and of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) religion in particular. I had had an encounter with anti-Mormon literature sometime in junior high school, and being somewhat flustered on that occasion I had quite sensibly ended up at the Welch home. There, Jack and his father introduced me to *History of the Church*, some writings by Hugh Nibley, and several other important LDS reference works. After an hour or two of study I learned two essential life-lessons that afternoon: one, anti-Mormons often lie; and two, that any serious Latter-day Saint needed a personal reference library such as the Welch family possessed.

I suspect that one cannot adequately understand Jack as an adult without having some knowledge of his immediate nuclear family and of his extraordinary upbringing. For example, all the Welches were musically gifted—not just talented, but genuinely gifted. Jack’s brother James is a professor of music and a professional organist. Growing up, I always expected that Jim would one day be the Tabernacle organist; he is certainly that good. Jack himself plays a mean clarinet among other instruments. I remember college date nights at Jimba’s (the premier Provo watering hole back then) when Jack and his Dixieland group provided the live entertainment for appreciative audiences. Jack’s parents, John and Unita, were the very definition of a power couple. Jack’s father was the most personally imposing and intellectually stimulating individual I had yet met in my early life—or for many, many years afterwards. Jack once told me that his family home evenings were often heated and intense as the Welch family not only taught and learned the Gospel but also debated, defended, analyzed, dissected and even extrapolated its principles in a family free-for-all. John W. Welch, Sr. was known as one of the best attorneys in California, yet I remember him primarily as someone who pushed me physically up the trail on pack trips or Scout outings, and as one who pushed me intellectually up the trail in several other settings. John Sr. once taught me a whole semester’s worth of synthetic logic in five minutes when I foolishly attempted to decline payment for service at his daughter’s wedding reception. I remember thinking later at Brigham Young University (BYU) that after John W. Welch Sr., Aristotle was fairly easy to deal with. I can reliably report, after a long association with the whole clan, that the vein of spiritual and

intellectual ore in the Welch family runs wide and deep and is of the very highest grade.

Sometime around Jack's fifteenth year he arrived at an intellectual and spiritual turning point that affected the rest of his professional life. His family had made a pack-in camping and fishing trip to Matlock Lake, above Onion Valley in the Sierras. On a truly inspired prompting, Unita carried in her pack a copy of Hugh Nibley's book *Lehi in the Desert*. When, a day or two into the trip, Jack had grown bored with fishing and did not want to hike, she produced the Nibley volume for him, and Jack stayed near camp to read it. He both consumed it, and was consumed by it. Jack told me later that it all came together for him there in the mountains—the Savior and the sticks of Judah and Joseph. And I think it grandly appropriate on the occasion of that personal conflagration, that it was Hugh Nibley who struck the match.

Jack continued to provide an academic role model for me throughout my college career. At one point, he graciously invited me to room with him, though I stupidly declined his invitation. I was afraid that living with Jack would overwhelm me—like being forced to drink from a fire hose. Still, I sometimes wonder how much better a scholar I would be now if I had not been so timid then.

The Honors Program at BYU was created in 1960, and Jack was one of its earliest and brightest stars. Though I hardly knew what an Honors Program was, at Jack's insistence I did apply and the experience changed my intellectual life. Again, in those years it was Jack rather than my family or my teachers who was my greatest mentor. Moreover, when I became an English major, I encountered Jack in his role as an assistant to Robert K. Thomas, then Honors Program Chair. When I added a Philosophy minor, Jack again was the teaching assistant, this time working for C. Terry Warner, another Honors Chair. And when I moved toward Classics, Jack was already there—eventually receiving his graduate degree in Classics at Oxford University where he studied as a Woodrow Wilson scholar.

Several years later, when I applied to Duke University in the Graduate School of Religion, I again found the ubiquitous John W. Welch, still a year or two ahead of me, pursuing his law degree there. However, his interest in Biblical Studies had remained so great that Jack sat in on several of my graduate courses in Religion. I particularly remember a course with James Charlesworth in the Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament when we were introduced, among other documents, to the *Narrative of Zosimus*. On the one hand, I was *impressed* by *Zosimus* and

noted in my mind some of the parallels between that text and the Book of Mormon. Jack, on the other hand, showed up in class a few days later *with a written paper* thoroughly mapping out the parallels—and this despite his own work load on the Duke Law Review! Over the years, I have come to expect this sort of impossible productivity from Jack. I have found it practical simply to consider him an elemental force of nature, like magnetism or gravity, and to resignedly appreciate his activity in much the same way I do those other natural forces.

While at Duke University I attended my first academic conference, the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) in Washington, D. C. Jack, whose membership in the SBL predated my own, drove us up from Durham. My first professional publication was a translation and commentary on the Coptic *Apocalypse of Adam*. Jack edited that paper for me and greatly improved it, thus teaching me that I had not yet learned all the skills I would need as a serious scholar. My first professional paper and my first professional travel were also sponsored by Jack and the Welch family at the inaugural meeting of FARMS which they so generously founded and funded. So, in looking back at my own early career, I must gratefully acknowledge that at most of the major crossroads, Jack was somewhere nearby quietly exerting a positive influence. And in the decades since then, I have watched him continue to sponsor, edit, and improve the work of scores (and perhaps hundreds) of other scholars as well.

When I arrived at BYU after several years teaching in the eastern United States, Jack was already at the Law School. President Jeffrey R. Holland also appointed him to a position in Religious Education to help improve scholarship there. This made perfect sense given Jack's training in Classics and Religious Studies. So it greatly surprised me to find Jack somewhat in the role of a Samaritan at BYU. With credentials in both Law and Religion, Jack encountered a few in both worlds who disliked his mixing of the two. I am embarrassed to admit that many of the "old guard" in Religious Education resented Jack—whom they considered an outsider—stepping onto their turf, and a few in the Law School apparently questioned his preoccupation with the sticks of Judah and Joseph. I mention this not to reopen old wounds, but to make it clear just how *exceptional* Jack's achievements at BYU have been. Universities are political entities, and BYU is more political than most. Much of what Jack has accomplished at BYU has been done in the face of well-entrenched factional opposition from many different directions. Indeed, he and I have not always been on the same side of an issue; nevertheless, I was

always uncomfortable and especially cautious when that was the case, for few have had more experience than I with both Jack's intelligence and his integrity.

In my career at five different colleges and universities, I have known faculty who have received *tremendous* honors from their institutions for their charisma—and for surprisingly little else, particularly academic productivity. Such are the politics of the academy. I believe in Jack's case; however, this has worked the other way round. True, Jack has received many honors, but in my mind he has never gotten the full credit from *all* quarters that he deserves. In my private opinion, Jack's discovery of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon and his inspired connection of the Sermon on the Mount with the Temple may be the two most important additions to the academic study of the sticks of Judah and Joseph in his generation. Yet Jack's full contributions to the BYU and to the LDS Church have sometimes been only grudgingly acknowledged by those who cannot overlook his greatest sin—his penchant for invading the turf of others with his powers of telescopic observation and microscopic analysis combined with his irritating habit of being right.

I have been privileged in my academic life to know three of the world's true geniuses (though I think "genius" is an overused term today). I have actually observed these three quite closely, having studied under, worked with, and worked *for* all three. The first of these giants was Hugh Nibley. The second was W. D. Davies, one of the greatest New Testament scholars of my generation. The third was Jacob Neusner—in my mind the Johanan ben Zaccai of post-holocaust Jewish Studies. I do not think anyone who has known these three would disagree with my assessment of their brilliance. In all honesty and candor based on my own long personal experience, I must add John W. Welch as the fourth on the list. I suspect that a few might disagree with me here or suspect me of special pleading; nonetheless, they are wrong. I have known Jack longer and at closer quarters than *any* of his critics. Perhaps one difference between Jack and the other three is that while Nibley, Davies, and Neusner pursued single meteoric careers, the genius of Jack—besides creating his own prodigious body of published work—has been diverted to fill many other streams: Law, Classics, FARMS, the Nibley archive, the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, the Religious Studies Center at BYU, the BYU New Testament Commentary Project, the Joseph Smith Papers, and the virtual salvation (or should I say exaltation?) of *BYU Studies*. After nearly seventy years experience with the man and in the field, it is my firm conviction that if John W. Welch is not remembered

as the single brightest star in the academic firmament of his generation, it will only be because he has provided entire constellations for us to explore in many different parts of the sky, and each constellation contains its own stars—brightened and polished by their mentor. May God continue to bless and prosper him!

Stephen E. Robinson *was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. Between 1966 and 1968 he served a mission to the Northern States. He graduated from the BYU Honors Program in 1971 with a degree in English Literature and Philosophy. In 1978 he received a doctorate in Biblical Studies from Duke University.*

Brother Robinson taught at five different colleges and universities before coming to BYU in 1986 and served as the department chair in Religion at Lycoming College (a Methodist school) while he was bishop of the Williamsport, Pennsylvania Ward of the LDS Church. He was the first Latter-day Saint to be granted tenure in religion at a non-LDS school. At BYU, he served as the department chair in Ancient Scripture for seven years and has published ten books and thirty-seven articles both in and out of the Church on biblically related topics. The Society of Biblical Literature published his monograph, The Testament of Adam. Two of his books, Believing Christ: The Parable of the Bicycle and Other Good News and Following Christ: The Parable of the Divers and More Good News have each received both the “Best Doctrinal Book” and “Book of the Year” awards from the Independent LDS Booksellers. How Wide the Divide? received a Best Book award from the Protestant publication Christianity Today. Brother Robinson has also received the Deseret Book Award for Exceptional Contribution to LDS Literature and several “best teacher” awards at BYU.

Brother Robinson is married to the former Janet Lynn Bowen, who is currently a CPA in Provo, Utah. Together they have six children.