Site of Fort Harmony, where some massacre participants gathered before the first attack on the emigrant train.

Mormon Memories and the Tragedy at Mountain Meadows

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> And I discover a dark and lonely place
> Where no person should have to go
> And I claw my way out as best I can.
> —*Melinda Whicher*[1]

For more than 150 years, men and women have argued over the meaning of the Mountain Meadows Massacre and what, if anything, should be told about it. For the past six years, I've had a role in this. For me, it has been "a dark and lonely place where no person should have to go," and now as I end my present work on the topic, I have some ideas about how this terrible tragedy should be remembered.

The telling of the Mountain Meadows Massacre is difficult not just because of the slippery nature of its historical sources. It is also difficult because of the various group memories that have come to surround it. Maurice Halbwachs, the early-twentieth-century sociologist whose writing laid the theoretical framework for the current boom in memory studies, argued that a place or event can have many collective memories, shaped by the "material traces, rites, texts, and traditions left behind by that past."[2] According to one interpreter of Halbwachs's work, many social groups within a single culture may have their own distinct memory, whether "social classes, families, associations, corporations, armies, [or] trade unions."[3]

In the case of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, there are as many memories as competing groups that have come to be a part of it: descendants of victims and perpetrators, Mormon leaders and lay members, Indians, and Mormon critics—each with their own determined memories of what happened and each with their own ideas about how the event should be remembered.

My purpose is not to judge these various collective memories. Our book does its best to do this by laying out the important facts and letting them speak for themselves.[4] Rather, I'm interested in how one social

group—my own people of believing Latter-day Saints—might come to grips with the event. What should our collective memory be?

Saint Luke offered some good advice when he began his gospel account. "It seemed good . . . to write an orderly account," he said, "so that you may know" (Luke 1:3–4 NIV). This is the first step. Any memory must have as its prerequisite *knowing*—not carefully packaged and sanitized knowing, but a full disclosure of the "truth and nothing but the truth." After studying more than a dozen essays dealing with religious violence in as many different cultures, Professor Edward T. Linenthal was beside himself because of what he encountered. It was not just the "blood splattered" pages of human violence that troubled him, but how later generations used "comforting expressions of sanitization, domestication, trivialization, and other insidious forms of forgetfulness" to smooth the hard truth from their atrocities.[5]

There is a reason why collective memories are so often halfhearted and half-true. In 1979, the U.S. Commission on the Jewish Holocaust noted that human nature seems constitutionally "opposed to keeping alive memories that hurt and disturb." Indeed, "the more cruel the wound, the greater the effort to cover it, to hide it beneath other wounds, other scars."[6]

The Commission knew this human tendency raised important questions. "Why then cling to unbearable memories that may forever rob us of our sleep?" the report asked. "Why not forget, turn the page, and proclaim: let it remain buried beneath the dark nightmares of our subconscious. Why not spare our children the weight of our collective burden and allow them to start their lives free of nocturnal obsessions and complexes, free of Auschwitz and its shadows?"[7]

During the past half-dozen years, I have been asked similar questions. They often come from the descendants of the perpetrators who are worried about their family—past branches and future ones. Sometimes concerned questions come from Church leaders. More often, I have asked these questions of myself, for any thoughtful historian of the massacre must know that the unvarnished truth can hurt both individuals and the public image of the Church, at least at first.

But such concerns are likely to weigh little with victims. "To remain silent and indifferent is the greatest sin of all," said Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel, who survived Auschwitz, Buna, Buchenwald, and Gleiwitz, though most of his family did not.[8] Many of the descendants of the Arkansas families and their friends are likely to agree. They want justice. For whatever the conduct (or misconduct) of the Arkansas company as it traveled through Utah in 1857, it did nothing to justify its fate: these men,

women, and children were victims, and their memory will always bear a terrible wrong.

In response, there is no alternative other than the truth. For truth will out. The massacre "is a ghost which will not be laid," said historian Juanita Brooks before publishing her pathbreaking study, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*.[9] Since Brooks's book was published in 1950, the stream of articles and books has continued—recently expanded by television programs, films, and websites. Nor will our book likely change things. The demons will not be exorcised until the public is convinced that there has been full disclosure and the hard questions about the massacre have been asked and answered—and the asking and answering of questions will always be the most difficult part of the process.

But Latter-day Saints will be poorly served if their motives are merely pragmatic ones—getting the story out from Church headquarters in the hope of managing public relations. Above all else, there is the moral dimension. While only a tortuous wrenching of facts points to Brigham Young as the massacre's planner, his Reformation and wartime preaching were incendiary. More to the point, LDS officials in Cedar City and Fort Harmony made decisions that directly led to the killing. This was acknowledged in a statement read on September 11, 2007—the 150th anniversary of the massacre—by Elder Henry B. Eyring on behalf of the First Presidency. "The truth, as we have come to know it, saddens us deeply," the statement read. "The gospel of Jesus Christ that we espouse, abhors the cold-blooded killing of men, women, and children. Indeed, it advocates peace and forgiveness. What was done here long ago by members of our Church represents a terrible and inexcusable departure from Christian teaching and conduct."[10]

Knowing the truth and, second, admitting wrongdoing are two necessary parts of a healthy memory. The third is *remembering*, which has become a current fashion. "Psychologists and novelists, historians and philosophers, cultural critics and politicians are repeating the injunction 'Remember!' like a reassuring drumbeat," Yale University theologian Miroslav Volf has written.[11] One reason for this interest may be our fascination with modern psychology and clinical analysis. It was "one of Sigmund Freud's basic insights" that we "must endure the pain of remembering to reach a cure."[12] But the current insistence upon remembering also reflects the trauma of the great bloodbaths of the last century—the mass killings of Armenia, two world wars, the partition of British India, the Jewish Holocaust, Rwanda, and the crimes of the totalitarian regimes of Hitler, Mao, and lesser despots. The process of remembering these atrocities and even memorializing them is a matter of justice. "The victims of political killings

cannot be brought back to life, nor can the harm and trauma of torture and abuse somehow be negated," wrote André du Toit of the goals of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. "What can be done, though, is publicly to restore the civic and human dignity of these victims precisely by acknowledging the truth of what was done to them."[13]

For the Mormon community—whatever its collective sin and guilt in the Mountain Meadows Massacre—there is a religious aspect to remembering. To forget is to violate the full teaching of the Decalogue's ninth commandment, which implies an honesty that permits no shading around the edges. Confession is also a part of moral redemption, as Dostoyevsky's character Raskolnikov learned in *Crime and Punishment*. But there is a practical reason, too, as remembering teaches lessons, which was probably the reason Moses thundered so strongly against the chosen people: "Remember, and forget not, how thou provokedst the Lord thy God to wrath in the wilderness: from the day that thou didst depart out of the land of Egypt, until ye came unto this place, ye have been rebellious against the Lord" (Deut. 9:7 KJV).

The question of how the Church should properly remember the massacre is best left to Church leaders. But Miroslav Volf is probably right when he says that social remembering by itself does not bring much healing. It must be done in a "right" or constructive way, which for Volf means "*integrating* the retrieved memories into a broader pattern of one's life story, either by making sense of the traumatic experiences or by tagging them as elements gone awry." Memories must be stitched "into the patchwork quilt of one's identity."[14]

What does this mean for Latter-day Saints? First, there must be an understanding of the context of events and general patterns. Scholars who have investigated religious violence in many cultures provide insights based on group psychology. Episodes of violence often begin when one people classify another as "the Other," stripping them of humanity and mentally transforming them into enemies. Once the process of devaluing and demonizing occurs, stereotypes take over, rumors circulate, and pressure builds to conform to group action against the perceived threat. Those classified as the enemy are often seen as the transgressors, even as steps are being taken against them. When these tinderbox conditions exist, a single incident, small or ordinary in usual circumstances, may spark great violence that can end in atrocity.[15]

The literature suggests that other elements are often present when "good people" do terrible things. Usually there is an atmosphere of authority and obedience, which allows errant leaders to trump the moral instincts of their followers. Atrocities also occur when followers do not have clear

messages about what is expected of them—when their culture or messages from headquarters leave local leaders wondering what they should do. Poverty increases the likelihood of problems by raising concerns about survival.[16] These conditions for mass killing—demonizing, authority, obedience, peer pressure, ambiguity, fear, and deprivation—were all present in southern Utah in 1857.

While these general conditions and impulses do much to explain what went wrong at the Meadows, Latter-day Saints are likely to seek other reasons closer to their faith and culture—almost commonplace things. What religious ideals did the perpetrators fail to follow? My personal list includes:

1. Saints must never put down other people (or other Mormons) as fellow human beings or allow distinctions to become a cause for self-righteousness. After all, the Pharisees who sought Jesus' death took their name and practices from their prideful claim of being righteous "separatists."[17]
2. Tolerance and forgiving are not just Christian prerogatives; they are the means of avoiding extreme behavior.
3. Obedience to religious authority ceases to be a virtue when it is unquestioned or untested, especially if leaders seek to cover "any degree of unrighteousness" or display the natural tendency for "unrighteous dominion" (D&C 121:37, 39). The final order to kill the emigrants occurred in a classic manner when Cedar City authorities tried to hide their earlier crimes, and many members of the local militia were willing to go along.
4. Religious authority, like civil authority, requires checks and balances. Southern Utah in 1857 dangerously concentrated religious and civil power, which allowed leaders to override several Mormon practices, including the need for consensus in Church councils.
5. Misguided religion can do great harm—just as proper or true religion may do great good. "Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of," Jesus said when some of his Apostles asked for the destruction of a Samaritan village (Luke 9:55 KJV).

Joseph Smith gave the means that, if observed, would have stopped plans for the massacre in their tracks: "No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; by

kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile" (D&C 121:41–42).[18] Joseph Smith's test—particularly the need for humility—should be strongly heeded by the Mountain Meadows historian. "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there," British novelist L. P. Hartley famously wrote.[19] It is the historian's obligation, of course, to sort through the confusion of the event to get the story right and also to recreate the peculiar quality of southern Utah life (in hierarchical, theocratic Utah, there were few places like Iron County). But the historian of the massacre must also understand the implacable, pounding force of what took place and the almost inexorable quality of events. "You know nothing about the spirit of the times," said one man who was present in southern Utah but who did not participate at the Meadows. "You don't understand and you can't understand," he told his son.[20]

Storytellers as well as readers might ask themselves the uneasy question of what they might have done had they been present in Cedar City in 1857. Characters and events seemed drawn from classical tragedy, and not just because of the force of circumstance and events. Mountain Meadows has the exaggerated flaws and shortcomings of protagonists that seem drawn from each of us. As a result, we may participate personally or vicariously in the story, and when the last page is turned, there may be some of the pity and fear that Aristotle prescribed as elements of catharsis.[21] It is no accident that the structure of our book adopts the general form of a Greek tragedy, and we hope that readers, like the ancient Athenians, will learn a few lessons about human nature—and themselves.[22]

Charles Upham, the early historian of the Salem witchcraft trials, understood this idea. "There are, indeed, few passages in the history of any people to be compared . . . in all that constitutes the pitiable and tragical, the mysterious and awful," he wrote in 1867 of the events that took place at Salem two hundred years earlier and that in so many ways paralleled those of the Mountain Meadows Massacre. He also knew of the shame of descendants—literal descendants as well as members of a later religious tradition. But Upham was sure that there was value to the process. "Human virtue never shines with more lustre, than when it arises amidst the imperfections or the ruins of our nature, arrays itself in the robes of penitence, and goes forth with earnest and humble sincerity to the work of reformation and restitution."[23] This result seems worth at least some of what we've addressed here—the pain of knowing, of confessing, and of actively remembering. In fact, in my mind, it is the only way to go forward.

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1. Melinda Whicher wrote these words in a high school English paper; her father, Alan Whicher, had been murdered in the Oklahoma City tragedy, April 19, 1995. Cited in Edward T. Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1.

2. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. and ed. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 119.

3. Lewis A. Coser's introductory essay in Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 22.

4. Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows: An American Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

5. Edward T. Linenthal, "Postscript: A Grim Geography of Remembrance," in *Religion, Violence, Memory, and Place,* ed. Oren Baruch Stier and J. Shawn Landres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 235.

6. Elie Wiesel to Jimmy Carter, September 27, 1979, in "Report to the President: President's Commission on the Holocaust," at Education Resources Information Center, http://eric.ed.gov:80/ERICdocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/33/a6/ad.pdf. (accessed September 15, 2008).

7. Wiesel to Carter, September 27, 1979, in "Report to the President."

8. This dictum may be found in innumerable citations, for example Marie Arana, "Elie Wiesel: A Debt to Memory," *Washington Post,* August 14, 2005, BW10.

9. Juanita Brooks, "Side-Lights on the Mountain Meadows Massacre," typescript, 1, 1940, copy at L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; Juanita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1950).

10. "150th Anniversary of Mountain Meadows Massacre," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/news-releases-stories/150th-anniversary-of-mountain-meadows-massacre (accessed October 10, 2008).

11. Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 20.

12. Volf, *End of Memory,* 27, citing Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, vol. 2 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth, 1955), 6.

13. André du Toit, "The Moral Foundations of the South African TRC: Truth as Acknowledgment and Justice as Recognition," in *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg and Dennis Thompson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 134.

14. Volf, *End of Memory,* 11, 27–28, italics in original.

15. Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

16. Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 212–53; Roy F. Baumeister, *Evil: Inside Human Cruelty and Violence* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1997); Rosa Brooks, "Good People, Evil Deeds," *Los Angeles Times*,

June 9, 2006, B11, also reprinted in "Killings in Iraq by 'Bad Apples'? Probably Not," *Deseret Morning News*, June 18, 2006, G8.

17. For example, see S. Kent Brown and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, *Between the Testaments: From Malachi to Matthew* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 178.

18. While this 1839 revelation was not a part of the canon of Mormon scripture in 1857, many like-minded passages were. For instance, the Book of Mormon prophet Alma taught that true disciples should be "humble, meek, submissive, patient, full of love and all long-suffering" (Alma 13:28).

19. L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953), 9.

20. William R. Palmer to Joseph Anderson, October 16, 1959, William R. Palmer Material, First Presidency General Administration Files, 1923, 1932, 1937–67, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. Palmer served an LDS mission to Oklahoma and Arkansas, and when some of the local men learned that he was from Cedar City, Utah, "there was wild talk of whipping me and even killing me." Palmer was rescued by a man named Garrison, who said that he had two sisters killed at the Meadows. Garrison took Palmer and his companion into his home and, despite his family's ordeal, felt to be "charitable." Palmer to Anderson, Ocotober 16, 1959, Palmer Material.

21. Alexander Nehamas, "Pity and Fear in the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*," in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics,* ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 293.

22. C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 3d ed. (New York: Odyssey, 1972), 172–75, 531–33.

23. Charles W. Upham, *Salem Witchcraft: With an Account of Salem Village and a History of Opinions on Witchcraft and Kindred Subjects*, foreword by Bryan F. Le Beau (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2000), 3–4, xvi. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who had an ancestor at Salem, also invoked the principle of apology and repentance in a passage in *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 12–13.