

Elder Marvin J. Ashton:

Friend to Prisoners and Prophets

By Breck England

For the first time in history, on 7 January 1984, a premier of the People's Republic of China was about to set foot on American soil. His helicopter hovered over the little community of Laie, Hawaii, as hundreds of diplomats, reporters, military officials, and interpreters waited among the palm trees of the Brigham Young University—Hawaii campus. When the helicopter landed, the man delegated to greet Premier Zhao Ziyang on behalf of the president of the United States and the American people was a tall, silver-haired man named Marvin J. Ashton.

There followed an intimate conversation—the leader of China's billion people found in Elder Ashton an easy listener. "I learned that he is proud of his family," Elder Ashton said. "He accepted our presentation of the bronze statue 'Teaching with Love' with graciousness. I found him to be a man of dignity, warmth, and a naturalness that made us comfortable together."

After several hours touring the Polynesian Cultural Center, watching a special show including students and members of the Church, the premier presented the Ashtons a beautiful, hand-engraved Chinese vase. "Norma and I were pleased to give it to BYU—Hawaii for display and remembrance of a new friendship."

Later in the day, a magnificent reception was held for the premier in Honolulu's Royal Hall where Elder and Sister Ashton waited quietly for a long time behind three rows of guests. "As the premier passed, he spotted us standing together, broke the reception line, and shook our hands." Before his departure, Premier Zhao commented to Elder Ashton, "I don't know what I will experience in my travels to America and Canada, but I want you to know this visit here with you will be the highlight."¹

Elder Marvin J. Ashton, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve since 1971, was an ideal choice to greet the Chinese premier. Although his background is in business, Elder Ashton could be said to have a "doctorate in human relationships." Beloved throughout the Church for his messages of compassion and hope, he says that his greatest

satisfaction is working with others and watching them grow. His influence has extended beyond the Church as well, and his gentle interest in people of all backgrounds has led him to serve as a state senator, a member of the Utah State Board of Regents, a social services director, and a counselor to teenagers, convicts, and community leaders. To him, meeting the premier of China was more than anything else an opportunity to make a new friend.

Marvin Jeremy Ashton was born in Salt Lake City 6 May 1915. His father, Marvin O. Ashton, was in later years a member of the Presiding Bishopric of the Church. A hardware and lumber dealer, he gave his son Marvin every opportunity to learn the business. Although he stressed self-reliance and the value of labor, his father frequently took him rabbit or duck hunting. Rae Jeremy Ashton, Marvin's mother, was a supportive wife, active in Relief Society and Primary—a wonderful homemaker for her three boys and three girls.

After his graduation from South High School, Marvin went on to the University of Utah School of Business, where he served as sports editor of the daily student newspaper. He also worked half-days at the family store. "My father told me that if I were going to serve a mission I would have to pay for it myself." With his business diploma and a fistful of savings, he was soon serving the Lord as a missionary in Great Britain, able to pay the expenses of his entire mission.

In those days of struggle and obscurity for the Church in England, the missionaries participated in organized sports and choral singing, trying to create a new Church image. Elder Ashton decided to give both a try. "I don't know how well I did in the 'Millennial Chorus' audition—they didn't keep me," he chuckles. But his height and power as a basketball player helped the missionary team he captained, "Saints," to a grand national crown in Britain and an even more astounding all-Europe championship at Lille, France.

These activities gave him many opportunities to indulge in his real hobby—meeting people. For six months in London, he worked as a leader with a Methodist boys' group, the "Boys' Brigade."

"They had lost their minister and couldn't afford another one, so I volunteered to take on the job. We met with them once a week to engage in moral teachings and wholesome activities. No conversions came from this, just good friends and very rewarding attachments."

During his mission, Elder Ashton made it a point to frequently read the Book of Mormon—and through this book felt a quiet confirmation of his testimony. "There are two kinds of testimonies," he often tells missionaries today. "The sudden-impact kind, and the quiet kind, when you finally know that you've had this feeling throughout your life. It

may not be a lightning bolt, but it's just as powerful as the other kind. I have this quiet kind of testimony, I recognize it, and I try to nourish it." As for the Book of Mormon, "I love it because of the way it makes me feel when I read it. There's a feeling, a spirit about the Book of Mormon that's perhaps even more significant than the lessons it teaches."

British Mission President Hugh B. Brown soon recognized Elder Ashton's abilities and appointed him managing editor of the *Millennial Star* and supervising elder of the British Mission office. President Brown conducted a study class for his staff five days a week, and Elder Ashton kept a notebook full of his president's "Practical Religious Thoughts to Live By," one of which has ever since been a kind of motto for Elder Ashton: "Each man knows God to the extent that he has become like him."²

Upon his return from his mission in 1939, Marvin married vivacious Norma Berntson in the Salt Lake Temple. President of the Associated Women Students, she had graduated from the University of Utah with highest honors and had worked for a couple of years as a schoolteacher. Marvin Ashton had his eye on Norma during her high school and college days and played tennis with her on the Berntson backyard court. In the year between his return from Britain and their marriage in 1940, Marvin built his bride a home, and to pay the mortgage on that home he continued to construct houses as a side business until all debts were met.

When World War II broke out, the wholesale lumber business in which he was involved was classified as a vital industry. Marvin spent the war period procuring lumber for governmental use. These years also saw the birth of the Ashtons' two boys and two girls.

In 1948 he was called to serve as a member of the General Board of the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association, a post he held for twenty-one years. These two decades brought Brother Ashton to a compassionate awareness of the needs and challenges of youth. "If I had my choice," he says, "I'd work with teens. You have to speak their language. You're their advocate if they trust you and you are willing to listen." He focused his efforts as a Utah legislator in the early 1960s on the needs of young people, spearheading the development of a new detention home for juveniles in trouble and the promotion of Weber State College in Ogden, Utah, to a four-year institution.

It was during these years that he met a man who is still a great hero to him: President N. Eldon Tanner. "I first met him while representing the Mutual in a meeting with the stake presidents in Alberta. When I arrived at our meeting, he was the only stake president who was there on time. I asked him what he thought we should do, and he replied,

‘You’re here and I’m here. Let’s start.’ That’s the kind of man he was—able to make right decisions without hesitation.”

In 1969, Elder Ashton was called as an Assistant to the Council of the Twelve with the task of bringing together under one head the Unified Social Services programs of the Church (now Welfare Services). He soon became aware of the serious problems facing alcoholics, delinquents, unwed mothers, and convicts. It wasn’t long before he established lasting relationships with both wardens and inmates of the Utah State Prison system. “We started a family home evening program in which the inmates had weekly contact with an LDS family,” Elder Ashton says. “This has been a great help to prisoners; of those who participate in this program, fewer return to prison than those who do not participate.” Even today, although Elder Ashton has not been involved with Welfare Services since his call to the Apostleship thirteen years ago, prison officials are quick to contact him with the many challenges they and the inmates face. “If I didn’t have anything else to do, I would like to be a liaison to the prison system,” he says.

For a long time, President Spencer W. Kimball coaxed Elder Ashton to take him to visit the Utah State Prison, but there was some concern about the President’s safety. Finally the arrangements were made for a quiet and unheralded tour of the facilities. Upon arrival, President Kimball visited with a couple of the inmates. The two men were both hardened felons.

Elder Ashton speaks of what followed as the greatest lesson in counseling he ever received. President Kimball sat down with the two men and said to one, “Tell me about your mother,” and to the other, “What does your father do?” Elder Ashton had wondered what the prophet of the Lord would say to these men, but he soon realized that President Kimball was listening instead of talking, sympathizing with and comforting the convicts as they poured out their feelings to him rather than chastising them for their current situations.

President Kimball paid tribute to Elder Ashton as a man of “no fancy trappings ... superb diplomacy ... literally devoted to helping others seek out and reach righteous destinations.”³ Such helpful service to others has been the watchword of Elder Ashton’s life. He was the last General Authority called by President David O. McKay, who was very weak from age and illness. “The only thing he said to me in his frail voice was ‘I want you to help me.’ In no way could I resist that appeal.” In his subsequent ministry, Elder Ashton has literally exemplified the discipleship Jesus spoke of: “I was in prison, and ye came unto me.” (Matt. 25:36.)

Once, at the Jordan River Temple, Elder Ashton was changing his clothes to attend a session when he was approached by a young man

about to be married. “Do you know where you met me last?” the young man asked. “At the Utah State Prison. You spoke to the inmates at a Christmas gathering there.”

“Oh,” responded Elder Ashton, a little surprised. “What did I say to help you?”

“I don’t remember what you said,” the young man replied, “but afterwards you came down among us and shook *my* hand! When I realized that an Apostle of the Lord would shake the hand of a man like me, then I knew that I must be worth something. You took your time to greet us individually, rather than avoiding us because of where we were or what we’d done.” He reported that that experience had marked the beginning of his road to repentance and forgiveness.

In his years of reaching out to those entangled in sin and despair, Elder Ashton has sustained others with simple, unqualified encouragement—and he has urged others to extend mercy and forgiveness as well:

“Those whose goal it is to follow the Savior straightway not only look for answers to their own problems, but also help others find solutions to life’s difficulties. They open their hearts to those who are troubled, ignored, or weary.”⁴ He is particularly concerned about the young who find themselves in trouble. “An unwed mother needs her family more than ever. The only way you help people is to take them from where they are!”

There is unusual demand on Elder Ashton’s time to counsel, at stake presidents’ requests, those who experience marital or moral difficulties. With troubled husbands and wives, he tries to “focus the burden upon both individuals rather than one. I ask them, no matter how difficult the situation, ‘What are *you* doing individually to make things better with your spouse? No matter how innocent you may feel, have you done your part to resolve the problem?’” To those who come to him for advice on moral entanglements, he says, “I’m not so concerned with what you’ve done or where you’ve been as I am with where you’re going from here.’ I don’t rehearse or review the circumstances and reasons for immoral behavior.”

Elder Ashton’s natural success as a counselor comes from his faith in people and his willingness to involve himself personally in *their* success. “If you don’t have faith in people, they won’t change for the better.” Elder Ashton recognizes that sometimes people need to lean on those who believe in them: “I would like those I counsel to feel that if they don’t perform up to capacity, that they’re letting *me* down as well as themselves.”

Faith in others is one of the keys to success in one’s own life, Elder Ashton notes. “Successful people have this in common—they have faith

in others. Whether a schoolteacher, Scoutmaster, or mission president, the leaders who had the most positive influence on me were the ones who had faith in me. When I was in junior high school, I was not getting the best grades in geometry. My teacher cracked me on the shoulder with his yardstick and let me know that he was not pleased with my marks. ‘I’m not going to tolerate this when I know what your potential is. You can do better and I’m not going to let you get away with it.’ That was a turning point, not only in that class, but in my life, because I knew that that teacher believed in me. The best bishops I ever had were the ones who believed in me enough to give me something extra to do—just working around the churchyard as a deacon was enough.”

To “take people from where they are” and instill in them a sense of self-worth is the essence of Elder Ashton’s leadership style. He has said, “In the kingdom of our Heavenly Father, nobody is a ‘nobody.’” When the Ashtons were attending a baseball game one day, a late arrival surveyed both teams and asked Elder Ashton, “Who’s losing?” He responded, “Neither one.” The newcomer looked puzzled as he walked away. Sister Ashton turned to her husband and said, “He doesn’t know you very well, does he?” From Elder Ashton’s perspective on people, no one is “losing.”⁵

A new dimension to his life of service came with his calling as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. It was a Thursday morning, 2 December 1971, when he was invited to the weekly meeting of the Twelve in the Salt Lake Temple, to fill the vacancy left by the death of Elder Richard L. Evans. “You wonder why the call has come to you,” Elder Ashton says, remembering that day, “but you get busy and persevere.”

Thousands in the worldwide church can now testify to the spiritual power of Elder Marvin J. Ashton. “Some of my most striking spiritual impressions come in the callings of new stake presidents. You pray and ponder for someone to take that place, and through the priesthood power you know who it is. You have a deadline, and the Lord helps you to meet it. You start interviewing at two o’clock, and by five o’clock you have found out what the Lord already knew. I have learned that you can’t get inspiration from the Lord without doing your part to make it possible—the plea for help must be accompanied by a humble searching for the answer. The 1978 revelation on priesthood involved the most intense spiritual impression I’ve ever felt, but that also came only after weeks, months, even years of prayer and searching on the part of the First Presidency and the Twelve.”

Elder Ashton finds spiritual direction in every avenue of his life. “The whisperings of the Spirit can be more powerful than a visitation that is

seen or heard—they stay with you longer. There have been times when I've been impressed to avoid interview appointments with people who may have wrong intentions. In car travel I've had strong impressions to slow up and look both ways even when the light was green. Two or three times tragedy was avoided because the Spirit prompted me to yield even when I had the right-of-way."

In teaching the Saints at stake conferences, Elder Ashton often feels "the impression to supplement my prepared messages. I more often than not supplement my text in favor of the promptings of the Spirit." But he does feel the responsibility to make his general conference addresses as polished and pointed as he can: "I always write out my talks ten or twelve times until I'm satisfied. I don't know how others feel, but I'm never comfortable unless the talk is the result of a lot of trimming and rewriting. I like to give the people something they can relate to, to speak to one topic, emphasize it strongly, and then sit down."

Today, in addition to his assignments as a member of the Twelve, Elder Ashton serves as chairman of the boards of a number of corporations and businesses. He attributes any successes he has in the businesses he supervises to a concern for personal friendship. "In business you get things done through people. To be successful in business I have to know my people, so I spend more time with individuals than with figures, budgets, and balance sheets."

Business management has always attracted Elder Ashton, but he also says "the greatest work in the world is our Heavenly Father's business—the only business you can depend on!" As a special witness of Jesus Christ, Elder Ashton never forgets his mission to teach and lift others. A friend, a state official who was inactive in the Church, was about to send his son on a mission. Elder Ashton heard of this and made an appointment with his friend, just to put his arm around him and say, "Wouldn't it be nice if he were going into the mission field as your son for time and all eternity?" This touched the inactive brother, who soon prepared himself and his family for the blessings of the temple.

Another time, Elder Ashton was discussing programs among inmates with an official of the Utah State Prison, a member of the Church, who was smoking and drinking coffee during the meeting. Elder Ashton looked at him and said, "Why don't you give this stuff up?" The man responded that he felt he could interact more easily with the prisoners if he could smoke with them. Elder Ashton replied, "Would you interact more easily with them if you were a criminal, too?" The brother soon made an important change in his life.

Today, after more than a decade of service in the Quorum of the Twelve, Elder Ashton is approaching his seventy-second birthday. The once

sandy hair, still curly, is now shining white, but age has not otherwise told on him. When he rises from his office chair he towers over everyone else in the room, and his pleasant face now and then crinkles up in a smile that can only be described as boyish. There is an irrepressible youthfulness about Marvin J. Ashton, befitting a man who has so long been a friend to the young people of the Church. His voice, mild and engaging, is a very comfortable voice: he speaks to complete strangers without a shade of formality or pretense, as if he had always known them.

An important outlet for Elder Ashton is physical activity. He looks and feels much younger than his seventy-one years because of a strenuous, regular program of exercise. He tries to play tennis weekly and walk a few miles each evening, when possible, with his wife, Norma. For Elder Ashton, athletic competition has a kind of spiritual value. “When you walk out on a tennis court, all you have is your racket—it doesn’t matter what degrees you hold or what standing you have in the community. There’s much to be learned about yourself when you’re out there alone with the racket!” His favorite tennis partner is Norma. “I don’t mind being classified as a competitor,” he says. “When I play tennis against my wife, I help her out of the car and walk her into the court arm-in-arm in a friendly manner, but when we’re *on* the court competing, it’s a different life!” Friends joke, “He’s a perfect gentleman to his wife—off the tennis court.” How does he feel when he loses? “Horrible!” he laughs.

Elder Ashton organizes his time and priorities so that his family always comes first. “It’s nice to have somebody to listen to you,” he says of his family. When asked about his role as a father, he responds: “There are two simple rules for raising children—love them and discipline them. Always explain to them the need for discipline without impulses, flashes of anger, slaps, or cutting words. If you feel anger as a parent, you must deliberately put it aside and counsel with a voice of reason.” Another important point: “Try to listen about 75 percent of the time. Ask your children what they think, give them a voice; the problems of children may not seem serious to us, but to them they’re as big as life itself. Instead of giving them orders, ask them what they think we should do. If you’ve taught them well, you’ll be surprised at the sound decisions they will help you make.”

Elder Ashton still tries to stay close to his children and has made a point of welcoming sons- and daughters-in-law as full members of his family circle. Oldest son John Ashton, who followed his father as a British missionary, is now an attorney in Salt Lake City and president of the University of Utah Alumni Association. Stephen Ashton is a business and personnel consultant. Two daughters, Jonne Ashton Wheadon and

Janice Ashton Sorensen, are married and live in Idaho and California, respectively.

Of Sister Ashton, her husband says, “Norma is the best thing that ever happened to me. We’ve always liked doing things together.” She has led an energetic, involved life, serving for several years on the Relief Society General Board and presently on the boards of Intermountain Health Care and Cottonwood Hospital in Salt Lake City. She has continued her college associations in Mortarboard and Owl and Key honorary societies, and recently received the Emeritus Citation for her active service to the University of Utah.

Elder Ashton has only one major personal concern: “Doing what I know I should do.” He empathizes with those who don’t. “The best counsel I could give others is what the Lord said: ‘If ye continue in my word, then ye are my disciples indeed.’ [John 8:31.] It’s not easy to continue. Often people are hurt, embarrassed, or they trip and get off to the side. People sometimes fall—but the best way to take reverses is as a steppingstone to future success.” In every parable and anecdote of his gentle messages to the Saints he echoes the same invitation the Master made: “He wants you. He will welcome you straightway regardless of where you have been, where you are now, who you are, or what talents you possess or lack.”⁶

Montaigne wrote, “Happy is he who has been able to find even the shadow of a true friend.”⁷ In Elder Marvin J. Ashton, thousands have found more than just the shadow of a true friend—the fellowship of this brotherly disciple of Christ is genuine and extends to high and low. He warms everyone he meets, from premiers of great nations to the most despondent prisoner; the troubled, ignored, or weary—the sinner, the despised, even the felon—have felt his unfeigned love for them. No one who knows Elder Ashton can doubt whom he follows, nor the truth of the Savior’s words: “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” (John 13:35.)

Notes

1. Marvin J. Ashton, “Report to President Gordon B. Hinckley,” 24 Jan. 1984, typescript in possession of author.
2. Funeral Sermon for Elder Hugh B. Brown, 5 Dec. 1975, typescript, Church Historical Department.
3. Marvin J. Ashton, *What’s Your Destination?* (Salt Lake City, Deseret Book Co., 1978), p. ix.
4. *Ensign*, May 1983, p. 31.
5. *What’s Your Destination?* p. 167.
6. *Ensign*, May 1983, p. 31.

7. Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, ed. Daniel Menager (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1965), I:84.
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