

In 1843, Joseph Smith lived in Nauvoo, Illinois, along the banks of the Mississippi River. He had moved there four years before alongside his family and faithful, fleeing religious persecution in Missouri. When he arrived, Joseph renamed the city Nauvoo, an Anglicization from Hebrew which meant, loosely, the city beautiful. But that was Joseph; just because he didn't understand a thing, didn't mean he couldn't translate it. Nauvoo was thought of as Joseph's city. He was its mayor and the president of the Church. By 1844, Nauvoo would have as many people as Chicago and emerge as a legitimate threat to its religious and political rivals. By 1844, Joseph and his brother Hyrum would also be dead.

For the past two years, I've found myself reading, transcribing, and annotating Joseph Smith's diary. I've focused on the last sixteen months of his life, from February 8, 1843 until June 27, 1844. The diary is a cobbling together of sources. In the sections I have read and reread, passages sometimes consist of first person accounts of Smith's days and other times of the minutes of a committee meeting, the editorial of a local newspaper, or the contents of one of Smith's sermons. Joseph's pronouncements are full of revelation yet shrouded in mystery. Without hyperbole, one might call him one of the best secret keepers in the history of the United States. His biographer Fawn Brodie said of Joseph, "Few men have written so much about themselves and said so little." Often, entering his diary feels like entering a maze: you try to make sense of his life not through interpretation but sheer repetition.

Why I've spent such time with Joseph's diary I cannot exactly say. I am not a Latter Day Saint, nor do I plan on becoming one.

Perhaps I can only say that, for the past few years, I've found myself in a crisis. I can hardly remember a thing about my past. I sense something bad will happen, but I am not sure what. I have lost, like Joseph, the ability to interpret the self. A body is buried in a casket. The casket lies within a vault. The earth is packed on top. A string wraps around the body's finger and extends up through the coffin, vault, and earth until it reaches a small stand, aboveground, where there is mounted a bell. The string is tied to the clapper of the bell. If the body has been buried alive, the finger wiggles, the string shakes, and the bell rings. The night watchman comes over with his shovel. He begins to dig. That's how I conceive of the self: as the clapper of that bell. I worry if the bell will ever ring. And if it does, who will come over with his shovel, and what he will find.