

Some Lessons I've Learned During My Life's Delightful Journey Crossing Geographical, Political, Racial, and Language Borders

Frederick G. Williams



Introduction

My namesake grandfather, twice removed, Dr. Frederick Granger Williams, was one of the recipients of a revelation given March 8, 1833 to the First Presidency, which I will use to establish the tone and the direction of my remarks:

And set in order the churches, and study and learn, and become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people. And this shall be your business and mission in all your lives. (D&C 90:15-16)

Since the Doctrine and Covenants has been canonized, this revelation is binding and applies to each member of the Church, not just to President Williams or to me. Each of us are to have an active role in the Church, each of us are to study and not just study, but to learn, each of us are to become acquainted with all good books, and with languages and with people, and this is to be our business and our mission throughout our lives.

My Progenitors

President and Dr. Williams served eleven missions, the longest of which was for 10 months when he left his wife, Rebecca, and four children and crossed the US border into Indian territory as the fifth member of the Lamanite Mission, and worked and served among the Delawares, Shawnees and Kay nations from 1830 to 1831.

His son, Dr. Ezra Granger Williams, left Nauvoo with his wife Henrietta, and crossed several borders before arriving in Utah territory, where Brigham Young appointed him the first Surgeon General in Utah. He too served several missions, including a colonizing three-year humanitarian mission to Cache County among the Shoshone Native Americans.

Dr. Ezra's son, my grandfather also named Frederick Granger Williams, crossed an international border into Mexico at the direction of President Wilford Woodruff, and there established his homes for his two wives, Amanda and Nancy, my grandmother. For twenty years he served as the first counselor in the Colonia Dublán Ward bishopric, made his living as a rancher and blacksmith, and served the community as its chief medical practitioner.

My father, Frederick Salem Williams, was born in Dublán, but left with his family when he was 18 months old for Arizona, due to the growing turmoil of the Mexican Revolution. When he was eighteen years old he crossed several international borders to serve in the South American Mission, barely six months after Apostle Melvin J. Ballard and Elder Rey L. Pratt of the Seventy, departed to return to the States. He was one of the few missionaries who got to work in both districts of the mission: the country of Argentina and the country of Brazil. He learned Spanish so well on his mission that upon his return, he was hired as a federal court interpreter in Phoenix, Arizona, and due to the organizational skills he learned on his mission, he was also hired as the executive secretary to the Honorable Judge Jacobs, the only federal judge in all of Arizona.

My Childhood

Just as with my Williams's forbearers, my upbringing involved close ties with family, and with the Church. And it involved crossing borders. I was born during WW II to my mission president parents in Argentina, and therefore when I learned to speak I was privileged to learn to speak bilingually, English and Spanish. My first airplane ride was at age two in 1942 from Buenos Aires to Brownsville, Texas, which took 5 days. After serving for four years as President of the Argentine Mission, my father was recruited by the U.S. State Department and served as Business Manager of the Institute of Inter-American Affairs, Health and Sanitation Department. By the age of five I had crisscrossed the States by train twice, and travelled by air and by ship between the U.S. and South America three times. Plus I had lived with my family in four countries in the following cities: Buenos Aires, Argentina; Nogales, Arizona; Caracas, Venezuela; Montevideo, Uruguay; and South Gate, California.

The lessons I learned during my childhood include: (1) The world is a very, very large and hostile place, with people of different cultures, languages and ethnic backgrounds killing each other in Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, while some other people teach peace through the gospel of Jesus Christ, and are engaged in helping the sick and the needy by building hospitals and establishing anti-malaria programs. (2) I learned that civilized people speak either English or Spanish, and preferably both. (3) I also learned that I needed to eat all the food on my plate because there were children in China who were starving, and (4) That I invariably got airsick, seasick, train sick, and carsick every time I travelled to cross a border.

My Youth

My youth was likewise a bilingual experience. My father was again called as mission president, this time to Uruguay and Paraguay. I was the first baptism in Uruguay; I sang in the mission choir and travelled with the president throughout the country and even over to Argentina, giving talks and participating actively in the work.

During my youth our home, when we were not in South America, was in South Gate, California, Phoenix, Arizona, or Downey, California. My Dad was the first Los Angeles Temple Mission President and Director of the Bureau of Information, and I worked there with him in maintenance and was one of the first guides in the Open House. But I graduated from high school in Lima, Peru where my father was business manager of TAPSA airline, which I worked on for a year after graduation as the operation's manager at Lima Tambo airport. My Dad was also the first branch president and I was the first branch clerk.

My progenitor was chastised for not teaching his children light and truth:

But verily I say unto you, my servant Frederick G. Williams, you have continued under this condemnation. You have not taught your children light and truth, according to the commandments; and that wicked one hath power, as yet, over you, and this is the cause of your affliction. And now a commandment I give unto you—if you will be delivered you shall set in order your own house, for there are many things that are not right in your house. (D&C 93:41-43)

We learn from this scripture that Satan, or the wicked one, has power over us when we are not following the commandments, even if we are a member of the First Presidency and even if we are righteous and building the kingdom. President Williams was a very busy man: he was the principle doctor for the Church, he was Joseph's scribe for his history, his scribe for most of the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, and his scribe for most all of the translation of the Old Testament. He was also a justice of the peace—the first member of the church to be elected to a government office— an officer of the Kirtland Safety Society, a regent of the School of the Prophets and of the Kirtland High School, the editor of a weekly Democratic newspaper entitled The Northern Times, and the Church's publisher: the first LDS Hymnal, the first edition of the Doctrine

and Covenants, the monthly newspaper the Messenger and Advocate and several more publications were all published by F. G. Williams and Co. We learn from this scripture that the most important assignment we have in this life is our family, not our profession, not our Church calling, not our service to the community, but our family. My father exemplified that commandment, and I have tried to follow in his footsteps.

Other lessons I learned: (1) In addition to the importance of family and the Church, I learned first hand that when there is no organized church (as was the case in Venezuela, in Uruguay and in Peru), we should get permission to hold Church in our home until it can be formally established. In addition to holding Church in our home, my father taught my sister and me early morning seminary; he called me to be branch pianist and I had to learn a new hymn every week, which advanced my ability to play the piano. (2) I learned that when there is no organized school to attend (as was the case in Venezuela), you should hold school in your home, which was taught by my mother. Or if there is a school, join the faculty and lead the choir, as my mother did, and I was the accompanist. (3) I also learned the importance of reading, especially history, biography, literature, and Mormon Americana; my parents read to us and my father always collected books and had a large library in which I would spend hours reading, which prompted me to want to collect books and read throughout my life. (4) During my teenage years I also learned that the “Hell of Temptation is that it is Tempting.” I had been taught in Primary that I should avoid evil and choose the right. I thought, hey, no sweat, evil is ugly and easily detected. No one had told me that evil is enticing, alluring, and desirable.” Truly the Hell of Temptation is that it is Tempting. Oh my! I had to learn to trust my elders when they said I should avoid even the appearance of evil, and that I shouldn’t go there, wherever there was that I wanted to go and where many of my affluent friends would go: I graduated from Franklin Delano Roosevelt High School in Lima Peru with the cream of the Peruvian and international crowd, the children of diplomats, politicians, rich businessmen, etc., and they would drive their parent’s cars with CD plates, which gave them immunity from arrest.

My Mission

After attending BYU for two years I turned in my papers to serve a mission; I was 20, the normal age to serve at that time. Although I did not tell the Lord about it in my prayers, I really didn’t want to serve a Spanish-speaking mission: I had already lived in two of the three Spanish-speaking missions in the whole church while growing up. I wanted to learn a new language; I wanted to go to Europe. But I knew the Lord had prepared me to speak Spanish so that I could hit the ground running as an effective missionary from day one. This was before there was a Language Training Mission or MTC and missionaries served an extra six months (in the case of Spanish or Portuguese) or an extra year (in the case of Chinese or Japanese). My call was to Brazil. I hadn’t even considered Brazil, it was a new language and a new culture as I had secretly desired, but close enough to Spanish that I could be an effective missionary almost from day one. This was an answer to an unspoken prayer.

The lessons I learned on my mission are priceless. Let me share two early ones: (1) I had known people who spoke Spanish and then learned Portuguese who ended up speaking neither, or speaking *Espanguês*. I knew people who spoke Portuguese and then learned Spanish who ended up speaking neither, or speaking *Portunhol*. I didn’t want that to happen to me. The Lord inspired me to treat Portuguese as a completely different language and not rely on my Spanish. I would look at the grammar book and instead of saying to myself, oh they conjugate verbs the same way they do in Spanish, I would say, oh that’s how they conjugate an –AR verb. I picked an accent that was very different from the Portuguese spoken near Uruguay, which was the Spanish I first learned. I chose to speak like a Paulista, but one who is gravely influenced by Rio’s palatalization of the t and d, and not a Paulista from the interior, or even one who is influenced by his Italian parentage. I wanted to follow my father’s example and learn the language like a native, just as I had Spanish.

(2) The second lesson I'll share also came from the example of my father. On the first night at the Salt Lake Mission Home, I knelt and made a covenant with the Lord that I would live every mission rule (including getting up at 6:00 every day), that I would study the language and study the gospel, that I would partner with the Holy Ghost and work hard and intelligently every day, that I would love my companions, especially the ones with difficult personalities—if the Lord would guide me to “the choice daughter of Israel” mentioned in my patriarchal blessing. I tried to fulfill my promise to the Lord in every detail; and I was introduced to Carol at the rehearsal of a musical in which she was starring, the morning after I got home.

University Graduation

We married in the Los Angeles Temple, Carol worked for the Telephone Company, I attended my junior year at Cal State LA with a double major: music education and Spanish. I taught early morning seminary, worked as a bonded messenger for the Bank of America, was a counselor in the branch presidency of the Indian Branch of greater Los Angeles, and played dance jobs on the weekend, with Carol as vocalist. But I was not furthering my knowledge of Portuguese, so we took the matter to the Lord. We got a telephone call from Don Holsinger, who had replaced Ron Dennis as the Portuguese Zone Counselor of the LTM. What an answer to prayer. He needed teachers of Portuguese, and I eventually replaced him as the Portuguese Zone Counselor. I'll share one lesson from my time as a student at BYU.

(1) One of the most significant lessons I learned at BYU came during my senior year. I sat down with my advisor, Professor Ernie Wilkins and explained my problem: I was a senior and didn't have a major, but I had plenty of near-minors, and that was part of the problem. I loved Spanish, I loved Portuguese, I loved literature, I loved history, I loved music, and I loved Mormon Americana and several other things. He said, “Well Fred, you are looking for “the thing.” I don't think there is such a thing. As children of God we can do all things. Just follow one of the things you like to do long enough to acquire the skills with which to pay the bills, and then go on enjoying all the rest.” That was such freeing advice. I thought that if I followed one, I could never enjoy the others. I chose to follow Portuguese for I thought I could make a greater contribution in that field. I received both an MA and Ph.D. in Portuguese and have done a lot of publishing in that field. But I have also published in Spanish, in History, and in Mormon Americana, and I continue to enjoy music in a variety of ways. It was excellent advice.

Graduate Studies at the U. of Wisconsin

At Wisconsin I was blessed to study with Jorge de Sena, the premier contemporary poet of Portugal and the third of all time after Camões and Fernando Pessoa. He was also considered Portugal's foremost critic and scholar. He would teach us literature from the point of an award-winning author, and then from the point of view of a critic. One important lesson Sena taught us was that literary theory is useful, but that we must not give it preference over the text itself. He also explained that today's popular literary theory would be replaced with another, and then another. Everyone was using either Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory, or Derrida's deconstruction theory. A corollary to those lessons also came from Sena. He often commented that a library was a cemetery like any other, filled with obsolete religions, philosophies, and theories, which no one accepts as truth today.

(1) This world-view squared with my understanding of the gospel, which is that at any point in time there will be several competing religions, philosophies and scientific theories that answer the demands of truth. But that with new discoveries, new insights, new technologies, those once trusted theories, philosophies and religions are replaced when they no longer answer the demands of truth. We see it most readily in the sciences, but it applies to all branches of inquiry. What we call Greek mythology today was not mythology to them at all, but a sincerely held religion, which nobody believes today. The revealed gospel teaches that Christ is the way, the truth and the light and that in the end, only his gospel will have answered all the demands of truth. In that day every philosopher, scientist and religious thinker will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is the Christ, the only truth.

(2) I also learned with Dr. Sena a forgotten truth: that the Portuguese were the premier border crossers. It was Portugal who invented and developed the maritime technology that opened the European Age of Discovery; it was Portugal that discovered more than 2/3 of the world for Europe, and it was Portugal who controlled the European commerce of Africa, Arabia, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, China, Japan, the Moluccas, the spice islands, Oceania, and half of South America for a century and a half. I also learned from him that Portugal's rise and fall is a cautionary tale. Like other empires, such as Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Rome, the Portuguese followed a well-known cycle: blessed by the Lord, they then became rich (the richest kingdom in all Christendom), and then became prideful, arrogant and wicked, which led to their fall and loss of territory at the hands of England, France, Holland and Spain in the seventeenth century. Contemporary witnesses believed that the exclamation point of God's promised punishment was the 9.0 Lisbon earth quake.

(3) A third beneficial lesson I learned while at Wisconsin came during the height of the student protests. It came from a prophet of God, Hugh B. Brown, speaking in a devotional to the students and faculty at BYU on May 12, 1969. I was then an editor of *The Carpenter: Reflections of Mormon Life*, together with Richard H. Cracroft, Edward L. Kimball, Ted Lyon, Don Holsinger and several others. President Brown said:

One of the most important things in the world is freedom of the mind; from this all other freedoms spring. Such freedom is necessarily dangerous, for one cannot think right without running the risk of thinking wrong, but generally more thinking is the antidote for the evils that spring from wrong thinking. More thinking is required, and we call upon you students to exercise your God-given right to think through every proposition that is submitted to you and to be unafraid to express your opinions, with proper respect for those to whom you talk and proper acknowledgment of your own shortcomings.

We live in an age when freedom of the mind is suppressed over much of the world. We must preserve this freedom in the Church and in America and resist all efforts of earnest men to suppress it, for when it is suppressed, we might lose the liberties vouchsafed in the Constitution of the United States.

Preserve, then, the freedom of your mind in education and in religion and be unafraid to express your thoughts and to insist upon your right to examine every proposition. We are not so much concerned with whether your thoughts are orthodox or heterodox as we are that you shall have thoughts. One may memorize much without learning anything. In this age of speed, there seems to be little time for meditation.

(4) One last observation from Wisconsin. In addition to my studies at the University, my Church calling as Deacon Advisor, my participation as an editor of a scholarly journal, and as a teacher and part-time Institute Director at Madison, I was very involved in music with my own agent, playing nightly through Saturday at the Wisconsin Dells resort in the summer-time and weekly in Rockton, Illinois in the winter. I prayed constantly for physical protection in travel and spiritual protection in the ambiances where I performed. I would not get home until 2:30 or 3:00 on Saturday night. I made a promise to the Lord that if I could not get up for early morning Priesthood, I would quit music, rather than quit my calling.

University of California

For twenty-seven years I taught literature written in Portuguese and Spanish at the University of California. I was a lively member of my profession and served as department chair for seven years; as chairman of the UC system-wide standing subcommittee on language; as founding director of the Jorge de Sena Center for Portuguese Studies, and held eight international symposia; I served as chairman of the Interuniversity Study Program at USP, the University of São Paulo (a consortium of eight American Universities, including the Universities of California, Wisconsin, Stanford, and Illinois); I also served as director of the University of California's Study Center at PUC-Rio, the Pontifical Catholic University; and as director of the Summer Institute Program in Portuguese at UCSB. I also served as bishop twice, as high counselor three times, as president of the Spanish branch, as institute teacher in both English and Spanish, and for six years as part-time Institute Director. I was also an editor of *Dialogue*, a *Journal of Mormon Thought*, and I continued to be involved in playing music. Carol completed her degree at UCSB Magna Cum Laude, and had a busy professional career while I was bishop and department chair, with seven children living at home we were teaching and raising. Some lessons learned.

(1) One of the most important lessons I learned from my years at the University of California was that in this life we have three full-time responsibilities, each of which requires our attention 24 hours a day to be fulfilled correctly; but we only have one 24-hour day, and we must sleep 8 of those. I believe this is done by the Lord on purpose. The responsibilities are of course family, church and profession, and we must learn how to juggle them. If I spend all my time on my family, I will surely lose my job and my standing in the Church. If I spend all my time on the church, I will surely lose my job and my family. If I spend all my time on my profession, I will surely lose my family and my standing in the Church.

I saw that many of my colleagues decided they would not marry and have a family in order to avoid that responsibility; some of them also decided that they would have nothing to do with religion for the same reason. But even these colleagues found that there still wasn't enough time to do all that was required. The answer is to seek and receive the help of the Holy Ghost each morning as we plan out our day. Shall I devote all my time to one or to another or should I break it up evenly, what is the right course of action for today? With the help of the Lord, we will be able to juggle correctly.

(2) I was also greatly influenced by the teachings of a brilliant scholar and committed disciple of Christ, Elder Neal A. Maxwell. He had been a professor of political science, the Dean of students and a Vice President at the University of Utah before his call as a General Authority. He taught us where our loyalties should lie. "Keep your citizenship in Jerusalem," he said, "and use your passport to go to Athens." He also said "LDS scholars can and should speak in the tongue of scholarship, but without losing the mother tongue of faith." He explained that "For a disciple of Jesus Christ, academic scholarship is a form of worship, another dimension of consecration. Hence one who seeks to be a disciple-scholar will take both scholarship and discipleship seriously." He also warned "We cannot let the world condemn our value system by calling attention to our professional mediocrity." He encouraged us to be involved: "We should be like Joseph in Egypt. In times of great famine, Joseph drew on divine power to be part of the solution—not just another hungry mouth to feed—but he leaned into the fray and was involved with mankind." And finally Elder Maxwell said "Use the gospel to influence your profession, rather than use your profession to influence the gospel."

Mission President

Many lessons were learned with respect to our call as mission president. Three years into my university career, we were interviewed on the telephone by President Spencer W. Kimball. One of his questions was framed with a statement: You speak both Spanish and Portuguese don't you Brother Williams, what about you, Sister Williams? She answered no. Another

question was whether or not I would have a job to return to if we served now. I explained we would not, because I had just started and did not yet have tenure, but we assured him we would accept the call anyway if it were extended to us. He said, no, the church did not want to jeopardize my ability to provide for my family. Two years later, we got a second phone call from President Kimball. This time Carol could answer that she spoke Portuguese, for she had taken a challenging eight-week intensive Portuguese language course the previous summer; but of course, I still did not have tenure.

Years later when Elder Boyd K. Packer interviewed us to be the first presidents of the São Paulo Interlagos Mission, he said the University of California may not give us three years leave. In fact, UCSB would only give us one for sure, and we would have to request the second while in the field. The Vice President gleefully told me that when Kissinger was called to serve as Secretary of State, Harvard only gave him two years of leave; who do you think you are, Fred?

(1) One lesson I taught the missionaries is that if you shower in the morning you will always sleep in dirty sheets; if you shower at night, you will sleep in clean sheets. (2) A second lesson I had learned and that I taught the missionaries was: We tackle the difficult challenges, not when we feel like doing them, or wait until we are in the mood to do them (which is never). We do the hard things because they are necessary, because they are the right things to do, and because we are obedient.

Brigham Young University

We never thought we would leave California, but we were invited to join the faculty at BYU. After many prayers and temple attendance, we felt impressed that the decision could go either way and that the Lord would be pleased with either of our choices. We were also impressed with the knowledge that if we came to BYU, Carol could sing with the Tabernacle Choir, and I, being close to the Church archives and professional historians, could finish and publish the biography of my namesake. When we were interviewed by Assistant to the President James D. Gordon, we shared that we felt we could make a greater contribution to the kingdom by staying in the provinces. And, because there were so many qualified people at BYU, I was afraid that I would be relegated to serving as the 5th string greeter for the High Priest group in my ward. His response was, let me ponder and pray about it, and I'll have an answer for you tomorrow.

The next day he said, yes, you do make a greater contribution to the kingdom in Santa Barbara. But when the students from all over California and from every corner of the earth come to BYU, they need to find professors who are not only tops in their field, but who have a knowledge and a testimony of the gospel. That's why you need to come to BYU.

We came to BYU nearly twenty years ago. Not only did Carol sing with the Choir for seven years (the maximum her age would allow), but I received help and funding that allowed for research and travel in order to complete the biography of President Frederick G. Williams, and get it published. But there has been much more. I became and continue to be an editor of *BYU Studies Quarterly*, which aids me in crossing many disciplinary borders. Through BYU's generous funding I was also able to cross many new international borders, including travel to the ten countries and regions of the world where Portuguese is the official language. I was also able to visit with their living poets and translate and publish over a thousand of their poems in eight separate bilingual volumes. I was also blessed to direct seven BYU study abroad-internship programs to Mozambique, and participate actively in the growth of the Church in that country.

It has been a delight and an inspiration to associate with my dedicated colleagues in the department of Spanish and Portuguese, and a blessing to work with and learn from the intelligent and faithful students at BYU, such as yourselves.

I close as I began, with a scripture. After chastising the First Presidency on May 6, 1833, for not teaching their families light and truth, you would think that the Lord would make it easier for them to find time to teach their children by removing some of their many responsibilities. He didn't. In fact he added to them by calling Frederick and Joseph on a mission and by

reminding them that they still had the translation project pending, and that in addition to languages, they needed to study history, and countries and kingdoms, plus the laws of God and man.

And let my servants Joseph Smith, Jun., and Frederick G. Williams make haste also[to preach my word]. And, verily I say unto you, that it is my will that you should hasten to translate my scriptures, and to obtain a knowledge of history, and of countries, and of kingdoms, of laws of God and man, and all this for the salvation of Zion. Amen (D&C 93:52-53).