



The Sacred Psychology of Pulling a Handcart

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What makes Pioneer Trek spiritually significant? It builds resilience, identity, and spiritual connection.

In the fall of each year, the Jewish people observe a holiday called Sukkot, or the Feast of the Tabernacles. This holiday commemorates the miraculous protection God provided to the Children of Israel during their 40-year journey to the promised land. During this week-long celebration, worshippers re-enact aspects of this monumental journey to varying degrees, in particular by worshipping inside a booth called a *sukkah*, which is intended to represent the tents in which the Children of Israel dwelt, and the cloud, which shadowed and protected the travelers by day.

While observers typically strive to at least eat all of their meals in the *sukkah* (including certain symbolic foods), more orthodox observers try to spend as much time in the

symbolic dwelling as possible, reciting prayers and reading the Torah. The week culminates with the end of the cycle of Torah reading for the year, after which the cycle immediately begins again. The Feast of the Tabernacles is a joyous holiday, intended both to remember the goodness of God to the Jewish people and to inspire practitioners to turn the [spiritual insights of the season](#) into spiritual growth and devotion over the coming year.

Although it is not technically a religious holiday, Latter-day Saints commemorate our own “exodus” each year on Pioneer Day. Most Latter-day Saints outside of Utah may not celebrate Pioneer Day. However, all across the United States, we do commemorate our own historic journey into the wilderness in a way remarkably similar to the Feast of the Tabernacles: Pioneer treks.

In a quite peculiar tradition sometimes disparagingly referred to as “pioneer LARPing,” we send thousands of teenagers into the wild each summer to re-enact the momentous journey of our ancestors across the plains to our own modern promised land, complete with costumes and working handcarts (albeit with much better footwear and supply chain operations). We are a “peculiar people,” and Trek is one quite peculiar example of that.

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For those not familiar with the practice, a Pioneer Trek reenactment is a large-scale camping and hiking activity for youth ages 14-18 put on by the Church at the local level. Typically, the youth dress in pioneer-style clothing, pack everything for the trip (except food) into a sleeping bag and a 5-gallon bucket, and divide into groups or “families” which each work together to pull their own hand carts with all their belongings for three to five days of hiking. During this time, they play pioneer era games, have religious devotionals, learn about real pioneers, and share family history.

Though there were a few instances of Pioneer Trek re-enactments beginning in the 60s, they first gained real popularity among the saints in the United States in 1997, the year of the Mormon Pioneer Trail Sesquicentennial Celebration. The idea quickly caught on, and suddenly, [stakes](#) all over the United States, as well as some in other countries, began

routinely holding Treks for their youth. Today, most stakes in the United States, as well as many others internationally, [hold Trek once every four years](#) for all the youth in their area.

Although it is sometimes criticized as [pointless](#), unnecessarily [difficult](#), or too [expensive](#), Trek is generally quite popular (as evidenced by the thousands of youth who sign up each year) and fulfills an important role in our religious culture. Like the exodus of the Children of Israel in the Old Testament, the Latter-day Saint exodus to the Salt Lake Valley was a defining event in church history. Thousands of faithful saints trekked thousands of miles by wagon or handcart, facing trials that beggar comparison in the 21st-century United States. They left behind everything they knew, buried loved ones along the trail, and in some cases never even saw our own “promised land” in the Salt Lake Valley. For many years, most members of the Church could trace their ancestry directly back to the pioneers, and pioneer stories were told and retold as part of rich family histories.

Not by coincidence, the sudden surge in interest in Trek closely followed a huge surge of growth in the Church (between 1947 and 1997, the [Church rapidly grew](#) from about 1 million members to about 10 million). Within the span of a few decades, the Church suddenly had an enormous number of members who did not have direct pioneer heritage. The history of the pioneers achieved a new place within our culture—a way to connect us both to literal ancestors, pioneer stock or not, as well as to our spiritual forbears in the faith, regardless of actual ancestry. In this sense, Trek is another way in which the [Old Testament prophecy is fulfilled](#), that the spirit of Elijah would “turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers.”

The [Church’s official guide for Trek leaders](#) states that the goal of Trek is to provide opportunities for youth to “strengthen testimonies, build unity, do family history, learn and appreciate Church history, feel gratitude for the sacrifices of the pioneers and the heritage they provided, appreciate their blessings more fully, seek and find guidance to overcome challenges, focus on serving and rescuing others, [and] learn core gospel principles.” In essence, those excellent goals are accomplished in a few days of hiking by teaching our youth resilience at two levels.

The first is the physical accomplishment of Trek. While the Church goes to great efforts to provide a level of support that makes the experience quite obviously different from the

actual pioneer journey (food is transported by car and cooked by volunteers, water trucks follow the group, and medical care and transport are readily available), Trek remains a physically strenuous activity and quite a bit different from what most teens are doing on a long summer weekend. Trek participants walk up to 15 miles per day, while pulling handcarts weighing hundreds of pounds, often through difficult terrain, at high elevations, and in hot summer weather (despite considerable effort to ensure the safety of participants, there has been at least [one death](#) of an adult leader due to the strain of the activity). This push outside of their comfort zone, teaches young people, by experience, that they can persevere through challenges and overcome their perceived limitations.. This instills confidence in our youth that can be hard to achieve in a modern society that has become increasingly focused on comfort.

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The second and even more important way that this experience teaches resilience is by teaching the reason for that resilience. [Several studies have shown](#) that storytelling and family history have a positive effect on identity formation by helping people find a secure place within a family narrative that extends beyond themselves. [President Russell M. Nelson said](#), “When our hearts turn to our ancestors, something changes inside us. We feel part of something greater than ourselves.”

By connecting their own personal experience of overcoming challenges to the experience of the pioneers, youth on Trek can make a connection between the strength their ancestors (literal, spiritual, or both) drew upon and what they can also draw upon when facing the difficulties of life. That strength is, of course, the enabling power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, as the central point of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In speaking of connecting to our pioneer ancestors, Elder Russell M. Ballard said, “I have a deep conviction that if we lose our ties to those who have gone before us, including our pioneer forefathers and mothers, we will lose a very precious treasure. I have spoken about “Faith in Every Footstep” in the past and will continue in the future because I know that [rising generations must have the same kind of faith](#) that the early Saints had in the Lord Jesus Christ and His restored gospel.” The stories of the pioneers are filled

with ways in which they drew upon the hope and strength of the gospel, so newly restored, to persevere through incredible challenges and tragedies.

Hopefully, most young people on Trek have yet to experience great difficulties, but many already have, and all will inevitably face unknown future challenges. On my own first Trek, the “ma” or adult female leader of our “family” had just recently lost her brother to suicide. I will never forget when she testified of the comforting Spirit she had felt during the week as she connected to both the suffering and the strength of those who had come before us. In the same way that the Feast of the Tabernacles inspires Jews to find strength in their shared faith and ancestry, when focused on spiritual connections and the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Trek can be a formative experience to help the youth truly connect what they have heard about finding strength through Jesus Christ to the reality of what that can look like in their own lives and the lives of people of faith who came before them.

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President Dallin H. Oaks said, “It is not enough to study or reenact the accomplishments of our pioneers. We need to identify the great, eternal principles they applied to achieve all they achieved for our benefit and then apply those principles to the challenges of our day. In that way, we honor their pioneering efforts, and we also reaffirm our heritage and strengthen its capacity to bless our own posterity and “those millions of our Heavenly Father’s children who have yet to hear and accept the gospel of Jesus Christ.” We are all pioneers in doing so.”

When young people are able to connect to their histories and see their place in a tradition of faith and courage, they are able to go forward in life with confidence, even if that confidence was discovered in the peculiar garb of a 19th century bonnet, a pair of suspenders, or a week in a modern tabernacle.

About the author

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Nidsa is a Latter-day Saint and mother of three. She has a Bachelor of Music from the University of Nevada, Reno, and is interested in politics, religion, and the arts. She lives in Northern Nevada with her husband and children.