

An Imperfect Brightness of Hope

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After admonishing his people to follow Christ and be baptized, Nephi said, “Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life” (2 Ne. 31:20). I see a paradoxical tension between the concepts of “enduring” and “having a perfect brightness of hope.” The word “endure” connotes little in the way of pleasure; its etymological root is “hard.” In French the word *dure*, which comes from the same Latin root, means “difficult,” “harsh,” “severe,” or “stern.” On the other hand, the words “perfect brightness of hope” connote light and optimism, warmth and peace. The two concepts don’t seem to go together.

Now Zina would be the first to tell you that having “a perfect brightness of hope” is not something I’m terribly good at. Depression does not just run in my family, it gallops. My mother stoically endured winter months with what we would now call Seasonal Affective Disorder. The Utah Valley temperature inversions that obscure the sun for weeks, sometimes months, on end left my mother sad, gloomy, and lethargic. Each year from December through April, I heard my mother repeat the words “I just *hate* winter,” her tone suggesting that the clouds were blocking the sun out of spite. My father, on the other hand, was perpetually dour. It was like living with Eeyore: “The sky has finally fallen. Always knew it would.” His depression was easily attributable to the fact that his own father was tragically killed in a lime kiln accident on his third birthday. The pain of that event was the cloud that hung over his family. His sister later committed suicide. But Dad, his

mother, and his other five siblings carried on, not with a “brightness of hope” but with a kind of hard-faced stoicism, a determined but gloomy grit. Of course, both of my parents grew up during the Great Depression. Don’t get me wrong: both my parents were kind, generous people, but “perfect brightness of hope” doesn’t describe my family of origin and, unfortunately, it doesn’t describe me. I’ve inherited Mom’s Seasonal Affective Disorder, and I learned Dad’s Eeyore all too well. Stoic I can do. Hope is much harder. When I read scripture passages that speak of “pressing forward” or “enduring to the end,” I automatically think of my parents, hunkered down and pushing forward, with an attitude of grim survival. To require endurance with “a brightness of hope” sounds tragically ironic. Like a clown at a funeral, it just doesn’t belong.

I see this same tragic irony in the LDS version of the fall of Adam and Eve. In stressing the fundamental truth of human existence that there must be “an opposition in all things,” the Book of Mormon states that only *after* the fall could Adam and Eve experience joy. In the garden, our first parents could have “no joy, for they knew no misery”; they could do “no good, for they knew no sin” (2 Ne. 2:11, 23). So ironically Adam and Eve can’t enjoy paradise until after they’ve been kicked out. Yet, Eve sums up the paradox in poignant but hopeful words: “Were it not for our transgression . . . we never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient” (Moses 5:11). It seems somehow cruel that Adam and Eve were evicted from paradise immediately *after* they gained the ability to enjoy it, but evidently it takes pain to understand joy and that’s something they could never have had in the garden.

I’m not sure we always appreciate the radical difference between our Mormon understanding of the fall and that of most contemporary Christians. For them, the fall of Adam and Eve was a disaster, the advent of all toil, sin, and suffering. Even for Milton, whose *Paradise Lost* posits a fortunate fall, it is only fortunate after God provides a savior. It was not part of an original plan, and it would have been much better if it had not happened: “Happier had it sufficed [Adam] to have known/Good by itself, and evil not at all” (11.88–89). For us Latter-day Saints, the fall was as much part of the original plan as was Christ’s atonement. They

were both intended from the foundations of time. They were Plan A rather than emergency-backup-Plan B. Both were essential for humanity to exist and for us to achieve our full potential.

And what potential! The Mormon view of the capacity for human development is so vast it's incomprehensible. But this infinite potential required Adam and Eve to leave the garden, to use their bodies to work, to create, to have children, to gain knowledge—in short, to live. Just as they had to know pain to understand joy, they had to lose their innocence in order to fully be. They could not become godlike and retain a childlike naiveté.

So earth life was intended from the start to be a place of trials, but also a place of joy. In the Book of Moses, Adam rejoices after the fall, stating, “because of my transgression my eyes are opened, and in this life I shall have joy, and again in the flesh I shall see God” (Moses 5:10). And Nephi states, “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy” (2 Ne. 2:25). For some of us, however, brain chemistry makes it easier to notice the pain than to notice the joy. The pain is inevitable; the joy needs to be sought after. The scriptures do tell us where to look for that joy. As Nephi says, it may be found in “love of God and of all men” and in “steadfastness in Christ.” I am struck by the word steadfastness. Steadfastness means having a fixed direction, a single purpose, and an unwavering resolution. But that also implies making a deliberate choice. We all have the choice to choose Christ or not, to choose joy or not.

Just as Adam and Eve were never meant to remain in the garden, they were never meant to remain in the lone and dreary world. They were not of this world, even though they had to learn from this world. But to return to their heavenly home required something impossible: to become wise but blameless, experienced but untainted.

Reconciling this paradox required the “glorious impossible,” as Madeleine L'Engle has called it, of Christ.¹ An angel describes Jesus's birth as “the condescension of God” (1 Ne. 11:16). The word condescension literally means “to descend with.” I have often wondered why Christ would have to become like us in order to save us. The answer seems to be for the same reason Adam and Eve had to leave the garden: the experience of human life is essential for god-

like understanding. Alma tells us that Christ endured “pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind” so that “his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:11–12). Only a god could do the impossible: endure human experience and remain sinless. And only a god could effect a reconciliation that allows us the same possibility.

So our goal in this life, it seems to me, is to leave here with a different type of innocence than we had when we came into it. We arrived innocent of experience, but we must return *with* experience but innocent of sin. We only do that by taking advantage of Christ’s healing grace and by seeking out the experiences that will help us grow. Mortality is not just about testing; it is about gaining knowledge. Certainly there are types of human experience we should avoid (the scriptures and Church leaders are pretty explicit about these), but it also seems to me that it is just as important to seek the experiences that will make us grow. And it’s usually from these that we find joy. I am reminded of Joseph Smith’s admonition in an oft-quoted sermon that

the things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity—thou must commune with God.²

Joseph seems to be just as concerned that the saints gain knowledge as he is that they avoid evil.

From my experience teaching primarily Mormon college students I have come to believe that we as a culture are often more concerned about not experiencing anything bad than we are about seeking out the good. Some want to wall themselves up in a room where nothing bad can get in, where they can maintain their child-like innocence. The problem with this is that nothing good can get in either. Mortality is a place for learning, for exploring, for growing, and you can’t do that walled up in a room. It’s as if we believe we could gain salvation while remaining in the Garden of Eden. We Mormons know that the Garden of Eden was safe, but it was never very interesting, and we could never progress there, never grow there. If our minds must “stretch as high as the utmost

heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss,” as Joseph said,³ it seems to me we can’t get there by simply avoiding R-rated movies and wearing modest attire. In the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord reminds Joseph Smith that the trials of Liberty Jail “will give [him] experience, and shall be for [his] good.” But the Lord also called Joseph to “seek . . . out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). The two types of experience—the pain that happens without our pursuing it and the learning that can only happen when we do pursue it—are both important. And it’s primarily in the latter we find joy.

I believe one of the things that has made my life more joyful, more bright, and more hopeful than that of my parents has been the blessing I’ve had to pursue learning. I have been extremely fortunate to gain my living by reading good books, seeking learning, and studying. And I get to spend my time engaged in studying religion! A friend of mine said that if, as Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living,” then “the unexplored faith is not worth having.” I like this idea! And I’m blessed with the opportunity to spend much of my life exploring issues of faith.

But this would also be hollow if it weren’t the practice of faith, for the implementation of those principles in my own life. That is where I need the most work, but it’s also the main key to joy. I know that not long after I die, all that I have written and published, what I have said in the classroom, what I have accomplished, will be forgotten. But I know that if I have lived a Christ-like life, I will have, as Nephi said, eternal life. That gives me a “brightness of hope.” Due to my brain chemistry and upbringing it’s not perfect, but as imperfect as it is it makes my life lighter and more joyful as I endure the pains of mortality. The Gospel has been the place where I have found the most profound joy. The ordinances I’ve received, the ordinations I’ve participated in, the healing blessings I have received, my marriage to Zina, the sealing to my parents and sister, the birth and blessing of my children, even the deaths and funerals of my parents have all been made sweet by my knowledge of my Savior’s atonement and my Heavenly Parents’ love. It’s been these sublime moments and others that have given me the knowledge that Christ’s gospel is

true, that he loves us, that he died for us. So I close with Christ's words: "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). With Christ, we can find joy.

Notes

1. Madeleine L'Engle, *The Glorious Impossible* (New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1990), 5.
2. Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1961), 137.
3. Ibid.