

## PALMYRA REDEMPTION

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Morning light pierces the green canopy. There is weightiness to this place.

This place has known God. Its very existence glorifies him, yearns for him.

I have come a long way to be here. Justin, Brooke, Sam, Serene, and I drove here from DC, through misty Allegheny darkness, winding through farm-country backroads of the forgotten corner of Pennsylvania. We stopped at a back-country gas station. My leather shoes and button-up shirt drew unwelcomed attention. The cashier asked why I was passing through. It was like being in a foreign country. I embraced the foreignness, responding, “I’m going to see where God spoke to Joseph Smith.” He silently bagged my beer and we went on our way.

Palmyra surprised me. After hours and hours of dramatic, beautiful country, it seems plain. The native soil of my community is little more than a bland village on flat land outside Rochester, New York. Hicks work the local 7-Eleven. Retirees sit on their porch swings. It’s the best and worst of America.

Last night, we arrived, exhausted, heads throbbing from the music, at about one o’clock in the morning. The GPS said we were passing the Sacred Grove, but it was inky black and we couldn’t see for a damn.

We parked by the side of a rural road, laid out a tarp in a furrow by the cornfield, and slept under the stars. Our spot, we would find in the morning, was situated beautifully between trees and the field. However,

our tarp was thin, I had only a thin sheet to wrap myself in, and I could feel roots and weeds pushing into my back. Immediately, we found that the mosquitos were insufferable, and around three in the morning a thunderstorm rolled in. It began to rain hard as we piled back into the car. The sky was lit by the most incredibly beautiful thunderstorm. It occurred to me that I had never known thunder that sounded like the wrath of God, whipping the fallen earth with light and power.

In the morning, after an hour or two of sleep, we woke up. The storm had passed; the dawn broke lavender over the fields and groves. The earth rolled gently around us, and the place no longer seemed the flat, desolate backwater it had appeared the night before.

Here I am, the Sacred Grove: boyhood haunt of the crippled, hook-nosed seer himself, ground zero of my life story. My friends and I stroll reverently through the wooded paths. I can't help thinking that my story is somehow wrapped up in what happened here. Like Joseph, I was a teenaged boy, a sinner, a seeker. Like him, I experienced God (though by no means in so dramatic a way). Like him, I could never have imagined how it would change my life. I could never have imagined the heartbreak and comfort, revelation and isolation, and, after it all, the stunned silence that awaits the seeker who finds an answer.

This is a place of peace. It is a place of refuge, reconciliation, recompense. Joseph came here to reconcile himself to God. God came here to recompense his children. I came here for refuge and reconciliation, from and with everything and everyone.

I think of Joseph. I picture him romping through the fields, sleeping under the stars, exploring the woods. I picture him with a striped orb, his seer stone, its earthy chocolate brown throbbing with ethereal light. The mundane made sacred. He carries it, holding it close to his chest. It lights his face eerily.

Driven by the beauty of it, haunted as only one who has seen God can be, he fled to Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and finally to heaven. He restored the temple rituals I've come to take such comfort in (oh, the irony!).

He raised his hands to God, clothed in great power and authority, and, pierced through, fell from the second story of Carthage Jail, fell into the earth from whence his precious light had come.

I don't look like him. My collared shirt and ready camera reek of the university. I'm more familiar with whiskey than with wisdom, more comfortable with marijuana than with mysticism.

And yet, something about Joseph has haunted me. He seems to stare up at me as he falls from that window. He has become the symbol of something inexplicable: the rapidity with which bright eyes and laughter flow to grief, frustration, and finally to that mysticism in which man, enwrapped in awe, deprived of himself, helpless in the hands of fate, comes at last to orbit silently around God, the fountain of light, who pours creation on the earth, rippling to the far reaches and reverberating to the far borders of the infinite dark. The whole universe dances to the rhythm of his poetry.

That Joseph saw such things from this boring frontier town is enough alone to stop me in my tracks.

I was born far too late to eulogize him. I know he was a polygamist. I know he was a fraud. I know about his banking ventures, his drama-ridden life, his naïveté and pretensions to greatness.

And yet, through all of it, my mind's eye focuses on one image: Joseph the man, brimming with life, laughing, eyes shining in the afternoon light, cutting to work in the woods. He was fated to grief, but also to jollity. He struggled for simple joy in the wake of his revelations. He struggled so greatly he earned the pity of God. That, at the end of the day, is what Joseph means to me.

He was human in the fullest and godliest sense of the term. Nothing higher can be said of a man.

Truth comes at great cost. It is most difficult to bear when that cost is incurred by innocent bystanders. That is a dilemma Joseph came to know. I, too, have come to know it.

So I sense in him a bit of myself. I sense in his story the human cost incurred by those who dare to ask big questions. I sense in him a man who struggled to balance the levity of friendship and the weightiness of God's truth—a man who, drenched in blood and Missouri mud, saw God and yearned only for bright eyes and simplicity.

After all (and it took me until sitting in the grove to realize this), the story of the Restoration is an object lesson in second chances. It wasn't a beginning at all; it was the crown that God placed on eighteen hundred years of Christian struggle and human failure. It is the fulfillment of, rather than the replacement of, the faith of my Irish Catholic ancestors. It is, in a sense, the apocalypse they longingly anticipated with monastic chants and liturgical prayer. It is the life of the world to come.

And so I know that as my Catholic ancestors yearned and unwittingly laid the seeds of restoration in my language and as my Catholic parents unwittingly laid the seeds of restoration in my worldview, so too the seeds of healing have been laid for me and for my mother and for everyone. Although I talk of doubt and smell of booze, already the ground is swelling with the promise of life, striving to break the soil and reach the light, and all will make sense and be at peace somehow.

I came here with my cup of irony.

I should be angry at him. It was he, after all, who set this whole amorphous Mormon experience in motion. Because of him my friends went forth with tens of thousands of their peers to preach the gospel to the infirm, the insane, the grief-stricken, the seekers of the world. Because of him temples are being constructed in Bangkok and Lisbon, Cedar City and Durban. Because of him an entire generation of young people abstains from sex and alcohol and profanity (or pretends to at least, which, after all, is something). Because of him we have the Mountain Meadows massacre and the Church welfare system, secret temple oaths, and heavily-publicized disaster relief efforts. Because of him suburban grieving parents are comforted and young seekers inspired. Because of him Joanna Brooks was wracked with sobs in the hotel restroom, and

all the converts' mothers are wracked with sobs across the world, and I am wracked with sobs for all the sobs I've wracked people with in the process of becoming Mormon. Because of him we have the restored hope that, through the empathetic God he showed us, it'll all be made all right somehow.

Would Joseph have done what he did if I could somehow go back and tell him what it would cost us?

I think so.

Would I have done what I did if, in the midst of my own sacred grove, I had known the pain and enlightenment rippling together throughout the rest of my life and the heartbreaking distance of this eccentric God?

I hope so.



So I guess it comes down to faith.

In 1820, Joseph saw something.

In 2015, I felt something.

Today, I hold to that.