

## THAT'S WHERE THE LIGHT ENTERS

Lon Young

I'm writing this from our roof, where I can see over the tops of mango trees, wet from last night's rain. Mynas swoop from palm to palm, and enough sun filters through the misty dawn to bring out the yellow of their beaks. An occasional butterfly sails high enough to daub a splotch of color onto the canvas, but this morning is a study in green: the green mangoes; the elegant plumage of coconut palms; the coconuts themselves, the smooth green-shelled ones the hired man has left to ripen after scaling the trunks the other day; the meditation hut's green tin roof, dented here and there from coconuts that crash like Indra's thunder above the heads of somnolent yogis.

But we were speaking of this monochromatic study, of things green, unripe, unready. Brush me into this canvas. Here. Sitting in the green shadows under the green awning over the roof of our green house. Three white ducks are patrolling the raked sand inside our gate. There should be a William Carlos Williams poem in here somewhere, with the morning glazed with rain as it is, and so much depending on everything else.

Cohen depends on the Tooth Fairy to find him in India, which she does, unbelievably, three times already. Lifting the pillow and placing three ten-rupee notes under his sleeping head, each bearing the likeness of Gandhi, who brings dreams of peace. And already the new teeth pushing through, each emptiness filling, slowly, inexorably. Somewhere between hole and whole.

And Stumpy, our gecko, fan-blade survivor, depending on the voodoo of cell regeneration. The brown-green bud sprouting like an onion bulb

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This essay received first place in the 2016 Euguene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest.

into another tail, until we can't tell him apart from the other geckos skittering across bedroom walls in the morning and snickering behind curtains at night while our family plays Bananagrams. Tile by tile, cell by cell. Forming and reforming. This resilience, this greening grace.

So much depending on everything else.

And now I imagine our patients from the colonies reading this and I am suddenly embarrassed. I want to hide these pages, or use them for something useful. Like wrapping the stump of a leg.

Because, here's the thing: The foot never grows back. Ever.



We'd been here for two weeks when Kate Kelly was excommunicated from the Mormon Church. We didn't learn of it right away. During a violent storm one night, the internet tower in our village was ripped from its rusting anchors and hurled to the ground. For days, it lay in the schoolyard like the twisted spine of some prehistoric creature. The snapped cable encased in its vertebrae no longer pulsed with life. And just like that, we were cut off.

I found out about Kate's verdict while attending the Chennai Branch a few Sundays later.

I was pulling my Facebook feed from the building's feeble Wi-Fi as Indians were filing in for sacrament meeting. When I saw the news, a spasm of grief went through my whole body. It was hard to take the sacrament. I remembered how Jan Shipp's would take communion for Lavina after she had been excommunicated.



Today I almost snipped off Kumar's toe. We'd gone out to Polambakkam colony. Rebecca was with me, and the kids. This is the colony where Cohen first learned to haul fresh water from the well and fill up the

plastic basins we use for washing wounds. He's gotten so good at his job he finds time to chase baby goats around the colony, and that's mostly what he is doing this morning while the rest of us tend a station. A dozen patients have already rotated through our line before Kumar takes his turn: Udaya, with her luminous smile; Vignesh, who brings the stubs of his wrists together in such a gracious greeting; some patients I don't recognize have also come through, their soiled bandages removed, feet cleaned, soaked, massaged with oil to keep them from cracking. There's Saranya, whose name means to surrender, sitting with her hands folded patiently in her lap while Navamani, our Indian nurse, carves necrotic tissue from her foot. And then Kumar.

Kumar and I sit opposite each other under the shade of a tamarind—he on a folding chair and me hunched over his foot on a flimsy plastic stool. I like working under the shade of that tree. If the leaves stir I can yank off my mask and breathe clean air, knowing the stench of putrefaction is being carried off with the breeze. Kumar's foot is propped up on my knee. It's his left foot, the right having been amputated sometime before our family started coming to this colony.

Even writing about it now, hours later, I'm shaking. I can see his big toe, and then empty spaces where other toes should have been. And a blackened horn.

One of the body's responses to peripheral nerve damage is reabsorbing the minerals and tissue of the fingers and bones. Kumar's missing toes had been victims of this process. In some cases, a patient's receding nail bed will continue to push out keratinous growth, unsightly protuberances that could take any shape. When I see them, I clip them—the same as any other nail. Kumar had one of these blackened nails jutting out from his foot like a stunted rhinoceros horn. I have in my tray a specialized nail cutting tool. I've done this many times. No sweat. I set the jaws firmly around the base of the nail for a clean, swift cut and then stop cold.

*This isn't a nail.*

I lift off the cutting tool and examine the nail. I see it then. The tissue at the base, encircled just moments before by my steel pincers, is actually soft, living flesh.

I feel sick. That toe, if you can properly call it a toe, is *his* toe. And I nearly snipped it off.



I have grown a beard. I wear sandals and flowing, linen pants. And every time I go out to the leprosy colonies, my messiah complexion burns in the fierce sun. At the end of a long day, I climb back into the medical van and come home and every night the geckos snicker. What do I know of healing? So much depends on everything else.

I stay home on Sunday. The rest of the family has driven two hours to Chennai, but I am too upset after finding out about what's happening to John Dehlin, the host of *Mormon Stories*. Over the years, John's podcasts have introduced me to people like Terryl Givens, Carol Lynn Pearson, Greg Prince, and Joanna Brooks—committed Latter-day Saints who acknowledge the messiness of our past and present, but move forward with faith in our future. This *Mormon Stories* community carved out a space for unconventional believers, like me, who wanted to stay. So, when I learned this week that John's new stake president has summoned him to a disciplinary council, it feels personal, as if the Church is deciding whether to amputate people like us from the Body of Christ.

I am not naïve. I understand that sometimes a limb must be amputated to save a life. But amputations are always tragic, and the mortal threat must be real, not imagined. Chopping off a foot because its warty toe doesn't meet an institutional aesthetic does not constitute a mortal threat. Nor would a wise surgeon remove an organ until fully understanding how its various and sometimes subtle functions are contributing to the overall health of the organism.

I think about leprosy. One insidious feature of the disease is the permanent damage to nerve endings in the patient's extremities. The microbacterium itself, the one that causes the disease, is easily neutralized and with simple treatment poses no further risk to the patient; a leprosy patient's body is, for all intents and purposes, healthy. However, because the nerve endings have been compromised, the healthy patient becomes insensitive to the pain inflicted on parts of his or her body, such as to the feet or hands.

Let's suppose such a young woman with leprosy steps on shards of broken glass. She would not perceive the injury being suffered by her foot. And when she lifts a scorching hot lid from the cooking pot, she will not sense her palm blistering from the heat. Insensitive to wound after wound—and numb to the need for healing—her wounds become infected and sores spread; ulcers, untreated, begin to eat away at perfectly healthy tissue. Then one day, a doctor will conclude that an amputation has become necessary to save her life.

I fire up my iPad and write a blog post for the church I have loved and served. I want to tell my community back home what I have learned. I say,

John Dehlin's ecclesiastical surgeon may decide an amputation is necessary. But let there be no mistake: this excommunication, this severing of a member from the Body of Christ, represents yet another failure. A failure to be sensitive to the very real pain and discomfort some members are feeling, to be responsive to their wounds and attentive to our care-giving. A failure to view lumpy toes and unsightly moles in their proper perspective, to ensure that what we think is dead isn't soft, living flesh. We have need of thee. We have need of thee.

May we come to recognize our inherent and indivisible unity. May we come to realize that the health and well-being of a part is the health and well-being of the whole. These understandings, after all, are key insights into the nature of atonement. As the Body of Christ, may we not lose our sensitivity to the pain and wounding experienced by some of our members. And when injury leads to infection, and we worry that the

infection will spread, let us be less keen to maim ourselves. Instead of a surgeon's knife, let us liberally apply the healing balm of love.

I title my post, "That We May Be One: Healing the Body of Christ." I hit "publish" and pace back and forth until Rebecca and the kids come home. And yes, I am wearing my Jesus sandals.



Today is Good Friday. I'm thinking a lot about wholeness and disconnection, as well as the Christian promise of atonement. I don't understand the theological dynamics at play in this doctrine. Why are we cut off? Severed? What does it mean to be connected? *I am the vine, ye are the branches . . . Except ye abide in me and I in you . . . Can the hand say to the foot—or a misshapen toe—I have no need of thee?*

The Body of Christ. The Human Family.

I have seen what happens when we cast undesirables from our midst. I have pointed fingers at Indian society and at my own church. But I remember Kumar, and a thousand like him. My own doing. How vulnerable, how easily cut, severed, dismembered in a moment of carelessness.

So today I celebrate wholeness and healing. I celebrate living tissue, the vital connections between us all. I celebrate the deformed and misshapen, and the spaces where things used to be, the minerals of bones taken back into the body, reabsorbed, skin folding over the emptiness. I celebrate that moment before we almost hurt someone, when we soften our grip and take a closer look. I celebrate love and reconciliation, and Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.



They say the site of a wound becomes the place of healing. Nowhere is that more true than here, among the leprosy-affected. I have witnessed many wounds and many kinds of healing. Our family can do so little

to solve anything, really. We're powerless to overturn cultural forces, untrained in medicine, naïve about the economics of poverty. Yet we are discovering our own role in healing. And it turns out, the only qualification is the capacity to be human—*humane*—in the presence of another human.

We go to a colony and sit down on a stool under a tree and wait for a patient to take a chair opposite us and then we remove their festering bandages and we find ourselves at the site of a wound. And what we do is we laugh, we show compassion, we express love, we touch, we stand in awe. We shed any notion that we, the supposed “whole,” are bringing healing to them, the presumed “broken.” We simply share a space where healing happens. And the healing happens for us as much as for them.

Healing becomes another name for wholeness revealing itself.

There's a passage in one of Rumi's poems I like to think of when a patient sits down and presents himself for our care, and we know it's going to be bad because of the flies and we don't think we can face it without flinching. Rumi says:

Don't turn your head.

Keep looking at the bandaged place.

That's where the Light enters . . .



On Easter Sunday our family drives out to one of the most beautiful colonies with some of the most luminous patients. They have bright flowers growing there, planted just for the sake of having bright flowers. And all morning long, I can see my family—my own bright flowers—sitting with people and creating places of healing. And I see that they do not turn their heads from another's wounds. And I see Light entering, washing away shadows. This morning is filled with grace and tenderness and laughter,

and the Light reveals the goodness and the wholeness of our family, the whole human family. I am grateful to have been in such a space.

Maybe our resurrection, our regeneration, doesn't depend on genetic codes or incantations. Maybe it depends on the persistence of continuing, maimed or not, in this absurd enterprise called life. To put one disfigured foot in front of the other. Or, having none, to crawl, as I have seen many here do. To let laughter boil up from the cauldron of suffering. To let singing rise with the keening of loss. This is the resilience we see in the colonies, in our family, in the hearts of the volunteers—all of us broken, all of us whole.

And the sun filters through the mist. And the day is green and good. And the most important things find a way.