

WHAT SHALL WE SEE?

Samuel Morris Brown

I'm still haunted by a woman who died in our intensive care unit a decade ago. She was eighteen weeks pregnant and had a kidney infection serious enough that her lungs failed. She quickly ended up on maximal life support, barely surviving from day to day. We diagnosed the Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome. That's by far the most common and expected scenario for someone whose lungs stop working during a serious infection, and pregnant women's lungs are notoriously susceptible to this problem. We treated her with everything we could, but she would not improve. In desperation, we decided to pretend that we didn't know what we thought we knew. What if, we asked, we had made ourselves blind to the truth about her condition?

Allowing ourselves new eyes, we realized that a subtle shadow on a heart ultrasound was not what it seemed to be. Her problem was that bacteria had migrated from her kidney to a slightly damaged heart valve. By interfering with the valve, the infection caused fluid to build up in the lungs. As cruel fate had it in this case, her heart couldn't be fixed: she died three days later. Even though our early blindness didn't determine her terrible outcome, I've never forgotten the moment I realized that we'd been looking intently but not seeing.

This lesson I learned at her bedside has had a strong influence on my religious life. It's not just the sacred sadness I experience when a person dies, although her death has stayed with me too. It's this fact that we had failed to see what mattered most. I've realized since then that we do this all the time—we think we see everything, but we're in fact profoundly blind.

Often what we *can't* see is more important than what we can. Today I want to consider with you two kinds of blindness, one new and one very old.

The new strain of blindness is something we've inherited from many generations of reformers in the West. They were trying to repair problems

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they saw in government, religion, science, and medicine, and they ended up exercising the nuclear option. Intending to limit the power of the Catholic Church, they created a world that struggled to understand religion itself. In the battle against human tyrannies, God and the possibility of life beyond the earthly became collateral damage, casualties in a bloody culture war.

But, of course, God is not dead and earth life is not all there is. It's just that many in the world now think so.

This blindness has become remarkably common. I received a playful postcard from a friend recently. It said, "Dear Religion, Pics or it didn't happen. Love, Science." I enjoyed the snarky card for two reasons. First, it's creative and at least a little funny. Second, it perfectly exemplifies this new blindness. It says that if we cannot hold something in our hands, then it doesn't exist. If we can't take a photograph of something, it's not real. This is the key assumption of a philosophy that masquerades as science and dominates much of our modern culture. This core belief—that what we can't hold in our hands doesn't exist—is both scientifically unmotivated and ultimately meaningless. Think for a moment about love, loyalty, courage, hope, or joy and you will know in an instant how much that we cannot hold in our hands in fact defines the very length and breadth of the world that really matters.

The modern world wants us to believe that there are only neutrons and electrons, molecules and states of matter, skin and bones. We are told to accept the naïve claim that the world is simply a random conglomeration of atoms and humans are just talking stardust. It's as if we are sailors in the merchant marine told that nothing exists beneath the surface of the sea. The ocean is just a wet road. We risk believing that the tip is the entire iceberg. But we people of faith know better than that. We allow ourselves to see. We know that we live and breathe and have our beings within a realm of divine power. The world positively crackles with that power. We just have to be willing to open our eyes.

I know from experience what it's like to open my eyes. By the time I was 18 years old, I'd spent about a decade viewing myself as a clear-sighted, atheist intellectual. When I abandoned atheism three decades ago, I realized that I could choose to see God in and through the world. I just had to stop closing my eyes. And once I allowed that possibility, it was as if I could

suddenly see the life under the ocean's surface—the fish and whales and plants and mountains and trenches. What had once been the shadowy and indistinct undulations of the sea surface now disclosed an overwhelming glory. The fact that our bodies are in fact made of star dust doesn't mean there's no more to us than those ancient physical particles.

I realize now that I'd received the great revelation of the majesty of God that courses through the entire world. The world is vaster and more beautiful than we moderns let on. It's one of the great delusions of our age, this idea that everything is precisely as it seems. That the world is only skin deep. Faith, under the tutoring of scripture, prayer, and church service, opens up the rich, voluptuous, spiritual world to our view. It is a stunning and humbling vision.

I'm aware that what I'm saying is the opposite of received wisdom in the world today. Critics like to say that we religious folk are like horses with blinders on, seeing only a fraction of our natural field of vision. We should admit that there are things we believers don't do well, some sins to which we are more prone. That's true enough, and we must repent of those sins, but it's not the central point. We can see the world in its God-drenched glory.

Allowing this revelation to change our minds can bring both healing respite and new challenges. We're not trying to see clearly just so that we can feel happier or smarter or more fulfilled. We're trying to see clearly because God calls us into actual communion. We are called to see God and, having seen God, to witness with our heavenly parents a world full of divine glory.

Enoch's sacred vision in Moses 6 points to the next blindness that worries me. This one's as old as humanity. Standing with God, Enoch sees a vision of all human history. Much as I think Christ must have done at Gethsemane, Enoch becomes aware of the divine glory of every single human being. His vision is sacred in part because it is unusual. Blindness to the divine in others is perhaps the oldest blindness of all.

It's easier to see ourselves and our needs than to witness the vast grandeur of the people who surround us. Our mortal selfishness makes it simpler for cultural assumptions about the nature of the world to confuse us.

In my personal and professional lives, much changed when a health crisis struck our family six years ago. In tearfully prolonged moments of soul-deep pain, I realized that I had been blind to my wife and children. I'd been blinded

by my work, my love of excellence and accomplishment. I'd seen them as characters in my life story rather than divine beings in their own right. As the work of repentance reshaped my soul, I realized that I'd also been blind to my patients and their families. I'd seen them as types, shadows, surfaces, problems to be solved rather than beings to encounter. I'd been satisfied with the surface of people, afraid, in retrospect, of their divinity.

There's a quote from C.S. Lewis that's so popular it's become a bit cliché. But it's popular because it is true and beautiful and speaks to the essence of things. He said, "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship. . . . There are no ordinary people; you have never talked to a mere mortal."

As Latter-day Saints, we believe that doctrine even more than Lewis did. We are perhaps uniquely called to see the divine in others. In that spirit, I often ask myself now "What would Jesus See?" I confess that I don't always know what Jesus would do in a given situation, but I've got an increasingly clear sense of what he would see. He sees the divine grace scintillating inside us; he sees the incomprehensible beauty that flows from every human being. I do well to see with Christ that beauty.

My sisters and brothers, we and the world we inhabit throb with divine power. The world beams and hums. If we will open our eyes, we will realize that the scintillating majesty of the Northern lights is always flickering in the souls of the people we encounter and in the very soul of the world. But we must agree to look. We must be willing to see. As we retrain our vision, the solutions to the problems of heaven and earth will be various and wide-ranging. We will all have roles to play in the grand drama. But first we must see.

God beckons us to dance, with our whole bodies and souls. Our heavenly parents call us to participate with them in the eternal rhythms that transfigure our eternal souls through the continuous mortal work of faith. Let us see our heavenly parents; let us see each other with the eyes of faith. May we heed their call to the dance of life with eyes wide open is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.