

TRUE JOY CANNOT BE FOUND IN THE GARDEN

Jenna Rakuita

When Eve partook of the fruit, she envisioned a different kind of world than she knew in Eden—a world where she could learn, progress, and create. Unlike most Christians, Latter-day Saints believe that Eve knew precisely what she was doing. She knew that true joy could not be found in the comfort of the garden, because she could not remain in ignorance and also progress toward godhood. So Eve, with humanity resting in her belly, partook of the fruit and entered into mortality (2 Nephi 2:22–25).

Like Eve, we can only progress and gain knowledge by asking difficult questions and wrestling with decisions. Eve taught humanity a valuable lesson when she saw past her mortal limits and anticipated something greater than what the present had to offer, and took the steps necessary to bring the world she imagined into existence—even though such a decision meant sacrificing the life she knew in the Garden of Eden.

My community involvement is also rooted in my vision of a different kind of world—one that goes beyond our current institutions and our contemporary society. And, similar to Eve, I work to bridge the gap between the realities of human existence and the possibilities of what it can become. In Proverbs 29:18 it states, “Where there is no vision, the people perish” This is the lesson we learned from our first mother, Eve (Genesis 3:20): human beings were not meant to rest in comfortable stagnation. We were designed to continue learning and progressing toward godhood.

Studying sociology gave me the opportunity to expand and stretch toward greater understanding regarding the world around me. I learned

about the racial history of the United States, and I was given language to inform my experiences as a woman of color as I gained knowledge about systems of hierarchies present in my country. During this time, I learned to bask in discomfort and I experienced hope for a better society—and for institutional changes at BYU itself that would offer greater belonging to students of color.

Like other minority groups on campus, allowing myself to hope for structural changes at BYU often felt futile because the small, incremental changes were often interspersed with setbacks, such as microaggressions and hate-filled comments. These setbacks included students repeating racial slurs in the classroom and professors calling on individuals from marginalized groups to speak on behalf of their entire communities. It was only after I knew the weariness associated with being part of a historically disadvantaged group on campus that I began to hope for spaces that would replenish my efforts.

In order to assist in the formation of such spaces, I had to exercise hope; such hope, I learned, must be preceded by knowledge. That is, the only way to conceptualize the need for a future that is *more* just, we must first understand the unequal distribution of justice that affects us presently. As I leaned into these emotions and the complexity of inequality, I began to realize that it takes courage to hope, it takes hope to envision, and it takes vision to create spaces that bind and heal.

Tinesha Zandamela and I had courage when we hoped for an intentional space where women of color at BYU could provide support to each other, we envisioned as we discussed the details for the Women of Color Club, and we created a community that fostered belonging so that others could have the courage to hope, envision, and create as well.

Each Thursday, we would gather in the Wilkinson Student Center. There we exchanged words, offered empathy, and provided healing. During one particular meeting, a fellow student approached me and stated that the space we each occupied in that room each week offered her an opportunity to recharge so that she could better face the stressors specific

to being a woman of color at BYU. She explained the healing nature of gathering and the necessity of community when fatigued by oppression.

As we gathered, we learned to navigate the intersection of race and gender with a variety of other identities. During one particular meeting we discussed the impacts of attending a university that offered a spiritual and secular learning environment. As individuals shared their personal experiences it became apparent that the narratives surrounding race within the Church affected each of us on campus.

For example, when a student comments that a person of color will be made white in the next life, when a professor states that the priesthood ban was a blessing that allowed black people the opportunity to exercise patience, and when classmates discuss how the genocide of Native Americans was the will of God, the isolation that historically marginalized groups experience extends beyond their human state and encompasses their entire soul.

With these unique experiences that students of color face at BYU, it is vital that steps are taken towards greater inclusion. Although there are a number of professors challenging the current processes at BYU and how they interact with individual's marginalized identities, the university is far from the imagined state discussed on a weekly basis at the Women of Color Club. On an administrative level, the university needs to be willing to evaluate their current efforts in regard to creating an environment where students of color feel comfortable.

The evaluation of such efforts would require BYU's administration to listen and learn from students of color. While this could be achieved through a variety of means, one option would be for the university to conduct a sociological study examining the experiences of racial minorities on campus. Ideally, this would lead to practices that would create a greater sense of belonging for students of color.

Such practices could include offering students opportunities to confront their assumptions and gain informed perspectives through courses designed to challenge preconceived notions and stereotypes,

such as a course on sociology of race and ethnicity. The knowledge gained from these courses would produce inclusion and diversity bred from an attempt to increase campus learning, rather than a desire to meet a specific quota.

Just as new practices should be created, current practices should also be reexamined to facilitate greater inclusion. For example, unlike most universities, BYU offers a reduced cost of attendance for Latter-day Saints rather than offering subsidized tuition for students who are residents of Utah. This leaves room for opportunities to expand the university's reach. Increased efforts should be made not only to recruit students of color, but also to foster an environment that students of color feel comfortable enough to attend, learn, and potentially return to teach at.

These changes would demonstrate how small steps lead progressively toward change. Just as knowledge is attained "line upon line, precept upon precept" (2 Nephi 28:30), efforts toward greater inclusion require gradual improvements that build upon one another.

The continuous and progressive nature of change begins with self-reflection. Like Eve, we must partake of the fruit before inviting others to do the same. President Russel M. Nelson said:

it was our glorious Mother Eve—with her far-reaching vision of our Heavenly [Parents'] plan—who initiated what we call "the Fall." Her wise and courageous choice and Adam's supporting decision moved God's plan of happiness forward. They made it possible for each of us to come to earth, receive a body, and prove that we would choose to stand up for Jesus Christ *now*, just as we did premortally.¹

As we follow Eve's example by asking difficult questions, wrestling with decisions, and ultimately leaving what is comfortable, we will be able to envision a different world—one that leads to growth and progression, rather than comfortable stagnation.

1. Russell M. Nelson, "Sisters' Participation in the Gathering of Israel," Oct. 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/10/sisters-participation-in-the-gathering-of-israel?lang=eng>.