

SO THEN THEY ARE NO
MORE TWAIN, BUT ONE:¹
AN EXPLORATION OF LIMINALITY

Tony Brown

Delivered on July 21, 2022 to the Prague EuroSeminar, a forum for young Latter-day Saints in Europe, which was held at Cumorah Academy, located near Prague, Czech Republic.

When the curtain rises on the Judeo-Christian garden story, we encounter a series of in-between or liminal phenomena: 1) Adam and Eve, who represent neither fallen humanity nor exalted deities, who “have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally” from each other and who thus, in the words of King Lear, represent “naked unaccommodated man”;² 2) the garden paradise located neither here nor there, neither in a state of temporality nor atemporality, betwixt and between as it were life and death, good and evil, heaven and hell; and 3) two commands—to multiply and replenish the earth and not to partake of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil lest their eyes should be opened and they should die—insoluble commands on their own terms, a Gordian knot if you will, thus leaving the two first humans suspended in an endless state of limbo.³

1. Matthew 19:6.

2. Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), 99.

3. Genesis 1:28; 2:17.

In this remarkable feat of literary brevity, we discover the very blueprint that defines the human condition: the conundrum of opposites, or “immortal antagonists” (using a term coined by Freud). Like Adam and Eve, we wander as strangers on earth “from a more exalted sphere”⁴ with eyes that see “through a glass, darkly”⁵ and perceive the world in terms of explicit separateness or opposites (what in Christian parlance we term “the Fall”), but in our journey we have the potential to reclaim a state of at-one-ment by recovering lost sight, or put another way, by developing in-sight, and thereby see again for the first time the implicit oneness or wholeness of all things.

Through his characters, the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky explored the murky depths of the human psyche to try to pinpoint the source of unconscious drives and behaviors motivating violence, ideology, addiction, and the like. He ruthlessly probed opposing aspects of his characters’ personalities and in doing so gave voice to his own raging internal debates, many of which coalesced around the subject of religion. With one character, Dostoevsky might assume the role of the Christian apologist and persuasively argue for the necessity of faith, while with another character he might discard faith in favor of reason and discount religion as nothing more than mere children’s fantasy, and in both instances, “each Dostoevsky would have been expressing himself with the utmost sincerity.”⁶

Supposing, though, that the tension between faith and reason could be resolved, what would the polarities look like? “Well,” you might say, “reason entails sense, rational thinking, logic, and the like,” but you see, every one of those descriptions of reason gets you no closer to understanding its meaning unless paired with its respective opposite. In other words, reason or sense exists as a concept only in relation

4. “O My Father,” *Hymns*, no. 292.

5. 1 Corinthians 13:12.

6. Steven Cassedy, *Dostoevsky’s Religion* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005), 87–88.

to non-sense and vice versa, and to insist on an either-or dichotomy ultimately amounts to calling for the end of existence itself. “The sad truth,” writes Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung, “is that man’s real life consists of a complex of inexorable opposites—day and night, birth and death, happiness and misery, good and evil;”⁷ and, I might add, war and peace. You see, the Russian novelist and author of *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy, understood that you cannot have war except in relation to peace, thus eliminating the possibility of a war *or* peace scenario.

I want us now to step back for a moment and consider ideas about marginal or liminal persons in our faith tradition. “These are people who are somehow left out in the patterning of [church culture and hierarchy], who are placeless,” writes anthropologist Mary Douglas in her treatise on the concepts of pollution and taboo in various societies and cultures. “They may be doing nothing morally wrong, but their status is indefinable.”⁸ Often, for them going to church is less about finding comfort and getting prejudices validated and more about comforting others and even being afflicted by them.⁹ Such individuals can struggle at times to connect emotionally and spiritually with their fellow brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, and yet the very symbol of the body of Christ speaks to the mystery of sacraments, or re-membering otherwise dis-membered opposites—the body and blood of Christ. As such, as Alan Watts writes, “What has been chopped and scattered becomes re-membered. So, in the Christian scheme, ‘Do this in remembrance of me.’ You see, the Christ has been sacrificed, chopped up, but the mass

7. Carl G. Jung, ed., *Man and His Symbols* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1964), 85.

8. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 95.

9. Eugene England, “Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel,” *Sunstone* 10, no. 10 (1986): 30–36; republished with additional material in *Sunstone* 22, nos. 3–4 (June 1999): 61–69. The updated version of the essay is also available online at <https://www.eugeneengland.org/why-the-church-is-as-true-as-the-gospel>. The quotation here is from the online version.

[sacrament] is celebrated in re-membrance. One of the old liturgies says the wheat which has been scattered all over the hills and grows up is gathered again into the bread. Re-membered.”¹⁰

Indeed, Jesus of Nazareth epitomizes the archetype of the liminal figure by virtue of his resisting classificatory boundaries and stripping off pretensions of social rank and status. Such marginal types represent an open versus closed type of morality and predictably run afoul of established norms just as they likewise infuse much-needed humanity.¹¹ Holy people are whole, which is to say, they have reconciled the opposites, and so, “there’s always something slightly scary about holy people. And other people react to them in very strange ways; they can’t make up their minds whether they’re saints or devils. And so holy people have, throughout history, always created a great deal of trouble, along with their creative results.”¹²

However, the tradition into which Jesus was born identified the “holy” as something or someone “set apart,” hence the myriad Levitical rules designed to separate, purify, demarcate, and punish transgressors. Accordingly, “only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against”¹³ did Jews seek to ensure a semblance of order in the face of otherwise disorder or impurity.

In this context, consider the account that the author of the Fourth Gospel, the book of John, records, namely that of Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well; however, bear in mind that John

10. Alan Watts, “The Middle Way,” available on Alan Watts Searchable Speech, <https://wattsalan.github.io/speechv2/vpoPC9H6DxCM.html>.

11. See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 110–11.

12. Alan Watts, “The Web of Life, Part 10: The Nature of Selfishness,” track 28 on *Out of Your Mind: Essential Listening from the Alan Watts Archive* (Louisville, Co.: Sounds True, 2004), transcript available at <https://genius.com/Alan-watts-the-web-of-life-part-10-the-nature-of-selfishness-annotated>.

13. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 4.

chooses the location of this encounter for symbolic reasons. In the Hebrew scriptures, one went to a well to find a wife. Take, for example, Abraham, who sends his servant to his place of origin to find a wife for his son Isaac. Abraham's servant travels to the town of Nahor and stops at a well where he meets Rebekah—the future wife of Isaac. Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebekah, likewise finds his wife Rachel at a well in the town of Haran. Finally, take Moses, the Old Testament precursor to Jesus of the New Testament, who, fleeing pharaoh, travels into the wilderness, where he sits next to a well and encounters seven daughters of a priest from Midian who come to draw water from the well. A skirmish with some rogue shepherds ensues, but Moses rises to the occasion and fends them off, for which the father of the seven daughters gives one of his daughters, Zipporah, to Moses to become his wife. Now to John's account.

In writing this account, John doesn't have Jesus ask just any woman for a drink of water. Rather, he specifically mentions that Jesus entreats a Samaritan woman to give him drink, thus underscoring the tension between the Jews and the Samaritans. In response to the woman's surprise at his asking her, a Samaritan, for a drink of water, Jesus immediately invites her to drink of the living water that only he can provide. Listening to Jesus' words with literal ears only confuses the woman further, who questions how he could give her drink when he doesn't so much as have a bucket with which to draw water. Jesus pushes her further to listen with metaphorical ears when he teaches, "whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life."¹⁴ The literal meaning of Jesus' words gives way to the metaphorical meaning, as evidenced by the Samaritan woman's earnest supplication: "Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw."¹⁵ Instead of perpetuating boundaries, Jesus offers

14. John 4:14.

15. John 4:15.

living water that weds (hence the symbol of the well) opposites and emphasizes their inherent oneness. As such, when viewed through the lens of living water, it suddenly becomes clear that people and things are “joined together by the boundaries we ordinarily take to separate them, and are, indeed, definable as themselves only in terms of other [people and] things that differ from them,” as Alan Watts describes.¹⁶

Consider also an episode involving a woman, whom we’re told “was a sinner,” who unexpectedly entered the home of a Pharisee with whom Jesus was dining, and, according to Luke, “stood at [Jesus’] feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.”¹⁷ Jesus straightway forgave the woman her sins, “for she loved much,”¹⁸ but rebuked the Pharisee, who falsely supposed that setting himself apart from seeming impurity constituted holiness. In one of his short stories, the Welsh author and mystic Arthur Machen explored this misguided assumption:

We are naturally inclined to think that a person who is very disagreeable to us must be a very great sinner! It is very disagreeable to have one’s pocket picked, and we pronounce the thief to be a very great sinner. In truth, he is merely an undeveloped man. He cannot be a saint, of course; but he may be, and often is, an infinitely better creature than thousands who have never broken a single commandment. He is a great nuisance to *us*, I admit, and we very properly lock him up if we catch him; but between his troublesome and unsocial action and evil—Oh, the connection is of the weakest.¹⁹

Jesus thus reproaches the Pharisee who eschewed becoming “emotionally involved with life and people as was the woman who was a sinner,”

16. Alan Watts, *The Two Hands of God: The Myths of Polarity* (Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 2020), 243.

17. Luke 7:38.

18. Luke 7:47.

19. Arthur Machen, “The White People” (1904), quoted in Watts, *The Two Hands of God*, 169.

writes John A. Sanford. “She found greater love than the Pharisee, and she was made whole, for in spite of her sins she had lived.”²⁰ Indeed, Jesus proclaims, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”²¹ In this account, we’re dealing with two liminal figures, two outcasts as it were—Jesus and the woman we’re told was a sinner—both of whom defy the social norm of the day and occupy that unique in-between space that on the one hand threatens the established order and on the other awakens and revitalizes it.

Relatedly, if you’ve read Dostoevsky and ever wondered why prostitutes and otherwise sexually compromised women who belong to this liminal category of despised or outlawed individuals ultimately redeem the hyper-rational and aloof protagonists, now you understand why. These were women who self-sacrificed to the point of offering their own bodies to strangers in order to mitigate the suffering of others, who embodied a “compassion springing not from any theoretical doctrine of social pity, with its implied sense of distance and hierarchy, but out of a frame of mind and heart placing the forgiver on exactly the same moral-human level as the forgiven,” as literary scholar Joseph Frank wrote in his study of Dostoevsky.²² Curiously, this archetype of the benevolent prostitute frames Matthew’s story of Jesus’ virgin birth, which he prefaces with a seventeen-verse genealogy intended to establish Jesus’ messianic credentials.

Matthew quite intentionally weaves four women into this genealogy, all of whom were known to readers of the Hebrew scriptures; however, these women were Gentiles, not Jews. Moreover, they would have been considered sexually compromised by the standards of their day. As such, Matthew’s genealogy is proclaiming that “the line that produced Jesus of Nazareth flowed through the incest of Tamar, the prostitution of Rahab,

20. John A. Sanford, *The Kingdom Within: The Inner Meaning of Jesus’ Sayings* (New York: HarperOne, 1987), 97.

21. John 10:10.

22. Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), 271.

the seduction of Ruth, and the adultery of Bathsheba” and that to be born into an otherwise questionable lineage “makes no difference, because God can bring holiness out of any human symbol of brokenness, inadequacy, or even evil. God can bring holiness out of incest, prostitution, seduction, and adultery. . . . God can work through any set of human circumstances to bring holiness out of life.”²³ Accordingly, for Dostoevsky as with the writers of the Gospels, who sought in words to capture the life of Jesus of Nazareth, redemption comes through transcending human categories and opposites, not through promoting detachment and insisting on hard lines and rigid concepts. Thus, drinking deeply the living water of the New Testament rather than the purifying water of the Old Testament unites people and nations spiritually such that nothing can come between them and the love of God.

Returning to the subject of faith and doubt, Paul Tillich, a German-American theologian, in his short but profound book titled *Dynamics of Faith* addresses these opposites within the context of what he calls “ultimate concern”:

Ultimate concern is ultimate risk and ultimate courage. . . . If doubt appears, it should not be considered as the negation of faith, but as an element which was always and will always be present in the act of faith. Existential doubt and faith are poles of the same reality, the state of ultimate concern. The insight into this structure of faith and doubt is of tremendous practical importance. Many Christians, as well as members of other religious groups, feel anxiety, guilt and despair about what they call “loss of faith.” But serious doubt is confirmation of faith. It indicates the seriousness of the concern, its unconditional character.²⁴

Indeed, meditating on something’s opposite can prove highly generative. For example, Shakespeare has Hamlet meditate on death by gazing at the skull of Yorick. Doing so may seem like a rather morbid and gloomy

23. John Shelby Spong, *Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy* (New York: HarperOne, 2016), 77.

24. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1957), 20, 25.

enterprise, but the deeper one penetrates the darkness of death, the more one understands its opposite, the radiance of life, “in the same way that manure is contributive to the perfume of the rose.”²⁵

Ironically, then, “To doubt the God you believe in is to serve him. It’s an offering. It’s your gift.”²⁶ In an interview with Blair Hodges, Mary Rakow, author of the novel *This Is Why I Came*, observed,

I believe that there is this other, this Holy One, and what this Holy One wants is relationship with us. God could have made robots . . . [but] we have freedom. And if we can’t say no, then we can’t say yes. So, I think saying “no,” if that’s what we’re feeling, then that’s our prayer . . . [and] that doesn’t hamper God’s love for each of us. It doesn’t make God pull back. It doesn’t make God wince. I believe what God wants is what we want in all of our love relationships. Even if we have to hear painful things, we want the other person to speak truthfully to us. We want to be really intimate, and God’s love is a perfect love. So it can hold everything.²⁷

Accordingly, in Isaiah, the Lord declares, “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things.”²⁸ Now there’s a god who can hold everything, or, put another way, can transcend opposites.

In one of my favorite movies, *Life of Pi*, the protagonist, Pi, whose very name connotes irrationality or the opposite of reason, describes to a writer precisely what Mary Rakow asserts, i.e., God’s capacity to hold everything:

PI: Faith is a house with many rooms.

WRITER: But no room for doubt?

25. MindPotNetwork, “Alan Watts on Carl Jung,” YouTube video, 56:20, Oct. 16, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jr_20uEVOiE.

26. Joshua Barrus, quoted in Blair Hodges *Fireside* podcast, “New Words,” <https://www.firesidepod.org/episodes/rakow>.

27. Mary Rakow, “New Words with Mary Rakow,” *Fireside with Blair Hodges*, Sept. 13, 2021, podcast, <https://www.firesidepod.org/episodes/rakow>.

28. Isaiah 45:7.

Pi: Oh plenty, on every floor. Doubt is useful; it keeps faith a living thing. Afterall, you cannot know the strength of your faith until it's been tested.²⁹

Indeed, by merely holding an intention to make space for doubt, more often than not we discover that we have more capacity than we originally thought; we have, as it were, a spare bedroom inside to host both faith and doubt, and a realization of this expanded capacity in turn enables us to host others' faith and doubt, to make beloved space for deepened interpersonal connections, and to give others the experience of "feeling felt."³⁰

For understandable reasons, humans in general gravitate to a unipolar universe, and members of our faith tradition are no exception. We want to take a side, as evidenced by a cursory examination of our scriptural canon and published hymns, e.g., "Who's on the Lord's Side?"³¹ or "I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth"³² or "He that is not with me is against me,"³³ and so forth, but at the same time we're reminded that "it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things,"³⁴ from Joseph Smith, "By proving contraries, truth is made manifest,"³⁵ or from the poet William Blake, "Without contraries is no progression."³⁶

29. *Life of Pi*, directed by Ang Lee (20th Century Fox, 2012), DVD, 21:16–21:29.

30. From Mindfulness Session 6 at Brigham Young University with Thomas McConkie, Winter 2021. The phrase "feeling felt" originates with neuroscientist Daniel Siegel.

31. "Who's on the Lord's Side?," *Hymns*, no. 260.

32. Revelation 3:15–16.

33. Matthew 12:30.

34. 2 Nephi 2:11.

35. "Letter to Israel Daniel Rupp, 5 June 1844," 1, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-israel-daniel-rupp-5-june-1844/1>.

36. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 3 (1790).

Far less burdensome to adopt a unipolar view of life that allows one to “escape pain, to seek quiet harbors, to find secure absolutes, even at the cost of worshipping idols”³⁷ than to hold the tension of opposites, but such was not the spirit of the early Saints who valued the pursuit of truth through reasoned debate. In fact, during the Kirtland and Nauvoo years, the Prophet Joseph frequently participated in debates, which “afforded an excellent exercise in logical thinking and expression. Joseph valued the practice, that his followers ‘might improve their minds and cultivate their powers of intellect in a proper manner,’” as Terryl Givens writes in *People of Paradox*.³⁸

William Blake recognized the underlying unity of opposites and “used the image of marriage to convey his sense of a redemptive *fusion* of the various sets of conflicting values as opposed to compromise—or suppression or victory of one or the other poles. In the true marriage, neither individual is destroyed, but their individual loneliness and limitation is transcended in their mutual creative acts and the fruit they bear—which they could not bear alone.”³⁹ In this regard, the late Eugene England, professor of English at Brigham Young University, taught, “Tragedy does not have to do with presence or lack of ultimate guarantees but with present suffering in the face of the paradoxes [the opposites] that reality progressively unfolds to the tragic quester,”⁴⁰ which is to say that once one pierces the veil of duality and perceives the world in terms of a both-and interdependent relationship, there’s no going back to a simple either-or dichotomy. Hence, tragedy lies in the irreversibility of expanded consciousness and the burden associated

37. Eugene England, “Joseph Smith and the Tragic Quest,” in *Dialogues with Myself: Personal Essays on Mormon Experience* (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1984), 6.

38. Terryl Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 81.

39. Eugene England, “Obedience, Integrity, and the Paradox of Selfhood,” in *Dialogues with Myself*, 34.

40. England, “Joseph Smith and the Tragic Quest,” 2.

therewith. Indeed, as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. pointed out, “A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions.”⁴¹

Christianity calls us to hang, as it were, suspended between two opposites, simple faith and intellectual rigor, and to discover truth that unites them. Herein, I would assert, lies the underlying liminal meaning of the Christian cross: nailed to the cross as a living historical man being put to death, Christ transcends death as he transcends life. The symbolism is obvious: to his left and right are the opposed thieves; he himself, in the middle, will descend with one and with the other ascend to that height from which he has already come down. Thus, Christ is bound to neither of the opposed terms, neither to the vertical nor the horizontal beam of his cross, though in a temporal-historical sense he is indeed bound, even crucified, as are we all when we see the implicit oneness in all things but choose to stay and live in a world defined by explicit duality.

In Mahayana Buddhism, the term “bodhisattva” refers to such a person who has penetrated this world of illusion and tasted the divine but, rather than depart it to enjoy everlasting burnings, chooses to stay and awake in others the same experience: “The Bodhisattva is one who comes back and appears in the everyday world and plays the game of the everyday world by the rules of the everyday world, but he brings with him *upaya*, he brings with him some way to show that he’s been on the journey, that he’s come back, and he’s going to let you in on the secret, too, if you—if, if, if—play it cool, and also come back to join in the everyday life of everyday people,” as Alan Watts explains.⁴² As such, the bodhisattva “returning to the world” means that s/he has discovered

41. Peggy Noonan, “Everyone Has Gone Crazy in Washington,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 15, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/everyone-has-gone-crazy-in-washington-11602806459>.

42. Infinite Wisdom, “Alan Watts – How to See Through the Game – The Secret to Life: Happiness,” YouTube video, 10:47, Feb. 12, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_h-FswIACKE.

that you don't have to go anywhere to find nirvana: nirvana is where you are.⁴³ Indeed, the verbal root *buddh-* from Buddha means "to awake, know." We find a marvelous analogue in our own faith tradition in the personage of Ammon, who chose to live among his heretofore enemies, the Lamanites, after having awakened to the eternal oneness of life: "And the king inquired of Ammon if it were his desire to dwell in the land among the Lamanites, or among his people. And Ammon said unto him: Yea, I desire to dwell among this people for a time; yea, and perhaps until the day I die."⁴⁴

In the Church, we're taught that the "glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth."⁴⁵ Light serves as a powerful metaphor of the birth of consciousness into the world, as illustrated in the opening lines of the creation story: "Let there be light."⁴⁶ In other words, the quest for light and truth represents coming of age and leaving the comforts of hearth and home, or in spiritual terms, leaving the security of others' testimonies and discovering one's own path in life, yet the danger of searching for light and truth arises when one discovers aspects of one's faith that seem to contradict past instruction and study. Sincere questioning sometimes can meet resistance from peers and leaders who regard a skeptical attitude as a mark of imperfect faith, and it's in these moments of vulnerability when such individuals understandably can opt for safe harbors replete with security and validation.

But I would push back by saying that unity is not sameness: one can't have an experience of *self* without having an experience of *other*, and yet in our efforts to promote unity, whether it be social, political, religious, or otherwise, we somehow forget that unity implies duality, which is to say relatedness, and thus attend to only one term of a

43. See Alan Watts, *Out of Your Mind: Tricksters, Interdependence, and the Cosmic Game of Hide-and-Seek* (Louisville, Colo.: Sounds True, 2017), 166.

44. Alma 17:22–23.

45. Doctrine and Covenants 93:36.

46. Genesis 1:3.

relationship (the figure) and neglect the other (the ground). You could say that it's the difference between seeing "either a chalice or kissing faces; for the logic of thought the two images are mutually exclusive."⁴⁷ Seeing a figure in relation to its ground likewise lends new meaning to Paul Tillich's description of God as "the ground of being," for just as our being is conditioned by the existence of a ground, so, too, God's work and glory is conditioned by our being.⁴⁸ Hence, the inner meaning of Jesus' supplication, "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us."⁴⁹ The two depend on one another for their existence and, thus, constitute a unified whole.

Likewise, without the serpent, you can't have God and vice versa; the two are one. Is it any wonder, therefore, that in the Old Testament the serpent takes on a dual persona as both poisonous and healing? Consider the example of Moses, who made a snake out of bronze and attached it to a pole. Anyone who was bitten by a snake could look at the bronze snake and be healed.⁵⁰ Just as Moses' staff turned into a serpent and then back into a staff, his hand became diseased before it regained its wholeness. A cycle occurs from the top to the bottom of reality and back again. God exists in one eternal round and can hold the tension of opposites together. By letting the serpent act as his agent, God willed evil but accomplished good. One ascends to godhood by transcending the devil; one transcends the devil by accepting his necessity.⁵¹ Christian imagery builds on this underlying relationship and reminds us that "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up."⁵²

47. Watts, *The Two Hands of God*, 24.

48. See Moses 1:39.

49. John 17:21.

50. Numbers 21:9.

51. Christian Swenson, email correspondence with author, Dec. 6, 2021.

52. John 3:14.

This recognition of God and nature as an integrated whole rather than a system of competing opposites plays out in a Chinese fable popularized by the British author and philosopher Alan Watts:

Once upon a time there was a Chinese farmer whose horse ran away. That evening, all of his neighbors came around to commiserate. They said, "We are so sorry to hear your horse has run away. This is most unfortunate." The farmer said, "Maybe." The next day the horse came back bringing seven wild horses with it, and in the evening, everybody came back and said, "Oh, isn't that lucky. What a great turn of events. You now have eight horses!" The farmer again said, "Maybe."

The following day his son tried to break one of the horses, and while riding it, he was thrown and broke his leg. The neighbors then said, "Oh dear, that's too bad," and the farmer responded, "Maybe." The next day the conscription officers came around to conscript people into the army, and they rejected his son because he had a broken leg. Again, all the neighbors came around and said, "Isn't that great!" Again, he said, "Maybe."⁵³

In the unassuming liminal figure of the farmer, we find someone who resists his neighbors' proclivity for reducing life's consequences to one of two poles and instead sees fortune and misfortune as mutually arising opposites that give way to a transcendent third or middle way, as expressed in the farmer's reply, "Maybe." Such a perspective neither negates opposites nor clings to them but sees the two as an undulating current flowing together "without compulsory means," as is so with all pure intelligence.⁵⁴ A person who taps into this flow experiences anew the original totality of the paradisaical garden "with its four mysterious rivers flowing in the four directions from a common source at the center"⁵⁵ and

53. Jade Panugan, "The Story of the Chinese Farmer," *Craftdeology*, <https://www.craftdeology.com/the-story-of-the-chinese-farmer-by-alan-watts/>.

54. See Doctrine and Covenants 121:46 and *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 151.

55. Diane K. Osbon, ed., *A Joseph Campbell Companion: Reflections on the Art of Living* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 144.

spontaneously acts from that center in a manner consistent with Jesus' instruction: "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth."⁵⁶

Nobody wants to admit that there must be an opponent for the game to go on; instead, we tirelessly labor to eliminate the enemy only to discover that we're fighting ourselves. Indeed, as a widely shared aphorism attributed to Jung reminds us, "Wholeness is not achieved by cutting off a portion of one's being, but by integration of the contraries,"⁵⁷ for without the shadow there can be no substance. Now, there's a danger associated with letting the cat out of the bag, so to say, and opening others' eyes to this reality, and one of those dangers is that when people realize that Team A only can exist in relation to Team B, then the energy requisite to go on fighting against the other will dry up. People will see through the game and refuse to keep playing. Indeed, instead of loving our "enemies" with the intent of converting them, we realize that they're terribly important to our knowing that we're nice.⁵⁸ Such a paradigm shift puts us in the embarrassing position of feeling indebted to those whom we previously considered the recipients of our charity and goodwill. So, what I want you to consider is a scenario where you have come to this realization, and then, like Ammon and the Buddha, you stay grounded in your community and impart your new-found wisdom in such a manner that unifies rather than estranges. This requires a certain art, and I would argue that it's precisely for this reason that Jesus likewise lived among the people and taught in parables.

I hope that in our search for truth, each of us will have the courage to endure some dark nights of the soul, similar to what Jesus experienced

56. Matthew 6:3.

57. This quotation is widely attributed to Jung, though the original source is unclear. See, for example, Lawrence Chan, "Systems Engineering," in *Engineering-Medicine: Principles and Applications of Engineering in Medicine*, edited by Lawrence S. Chan and William C. Tang (New York: Routledge, 2019), 78.

58. Alan Watts, "Spectrum of Love," audio and transcript available at <https://alanwatts.org/transcripts/spectrum-of-love/>.

during his forty-day sojourn into the desert, to take on “some pain, including the pain of doubt and indecision.”⁵⁹ Those who evade such a crucible, “who believe they believe in God, but without passion in the heart, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, and even at times without despair, believe only in the idea of God, and not in God himself.”⁶⁰ After all, as Fiona Givens writes,

If we assume that religion exists to answer our questions, we will be disappointed, for that is not its purpose. Many of the Savior’s sermons seemed calculated to disturb rather than to reassure. After one particularly disquieting discourse, many of the Lord’s disciples “walked no more with him.” Jesus turned to His apostles and asked: “Will ye also go away?” They responded simply: “To whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.” They were as uncomfortable as any of the other disciples, but they understood that Christ was indeed the Messiah. They had committed themselves to Him. There was nothing to do but follow Him in spite of the cost.⁶¹

For you and me, the cost likely will not entail martyrdom, or an exclamation point at the end of our lives; rather, it will entail quietly learning how to embrace ambiguity of expression over unequivocalness. It will entail mustering the “courage to live in a radically insecure world with continued integrity.”⁶²

In Peter we find the embodiment of this tension, and Jesus clearly foresees that before Peter can rise to the stature of the head of the Church, he first must descend to the depths of hell by thrice denying him. In other words, the ascent only exists in relation to the descent.

59. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Engaging God’s World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 125.

60. Miguel de Unamuno, quoted in Madeleine L’Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 32.

61. Fiona Givens, “Spiritual Pathogens,” *LDS Living Magazine* (Jan./Feb. 2014): 24–25.

62. “Bishop Spong ponders eternity,” Minnesota Public Radio, Sept. 16, 2009, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2009/09/16/midmorning1>.

“Thy mind, O man!” begins Joseph Smith in a letter dictated from the depths of Liberty Jail, “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.”⁶³

If any of you feel spiritually incomplete, I urge you to find a place in this patchwork quilt of questers collectively referred to as the body of Christ, which “needs its full complement of members—the devout, the wayward, the uncomfortable, the struggling.”⁶⁴ For me, a hallmark of God’s grace lies in his working with our strengths *and* weaknesses to build his kingdom. I take Alma at his word when he testified that “*all* things denote there is a God,”⁶⁵ which, in the context of the Church, reaffirms in my mind the beauty of broken or dis-membered people coming together to re-member Christ through the dualistic emblems of the sacrament and in so doing experiencing at-one-ment.

During a discussion with a student in 2019, I compared finding truth to assembling shards of a stained-glass window, the collective result of which transcends the pieces alone and offers a stunning glimpse into the eternal Self. Shortly after our conversation, she penned the following poem, which you’ll notice alludes to Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, and which I think represents a sublime expression of wholeness.

“Stained Glass”⁶⁶ by Shannon Bairett

A shard pressed in the palm draws blood.
Turned delicately, by its edges, the light stabs too.
Admiration—pain; and truth—
Truth is violence.

63. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 137.

64. Terry Givens and Fiona Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 107.

65. Alma 30:44, italics added.

66. Shannon Bairett, “Stained Glass,” *Humanities* (Fall 2019): 3. Reprinted with permission of Shannon Bairett Murphy.

I didn't ask for pieces.
I came here for wholes and found holes. I pulled a nail from my shoe
the other day
Without thinking to ask where it came from.
Only that it found its rest in my sole.
That drew blood too.

What can I tell you? Two decades isn't long for research,
However assiduous.
This doesn't even rhyme.
Most truths I find in fragments by the road.

A wise man said
That wayside seeds don't grow.
But I protest that sometimes they shatter
And those of us who aren't rooted yet
Seek out what sustenance we can.

Where do my fragments leave me?
Bleeding out handfuls of glass on the same road I've always walked.
There are several roads, they say, but I've only ever found this one.
In sunlight, the gravel shimmers like gold
And I cover my eyes.

Thinking back, the nail probably came from the burning church
It was old, and the antique glass I found there
Bubbled over, distorted, but more intact than most
Offered a fuller reflection
Than any yet.
I retrace my steps.

Before the altar I found the nail. And now, I look up to find:
Another hole.
A bleeding palm.
Sandals worn from roads lonelier than mine
(And from mine too.)

An impeccable reflection in eyes that finally teach me who I am.
Weary in worn and punctured sneakers
Beneath a roof burned through to heaven

Rays shine down to
 Bathe me in colors.
 A spectrum born of the Son.

And standing
 Splashed
 In pieces of white,
 I finally understand
 Why we paint the Savior in stained fragments made whole.

Here we find an eloquent rendering of separateness comprising an underlying wholeness, which unity I would assert likewise relates to the Prophet Joseph's teaching regarding the living and the dead, specifically that "we without them cannot be made perfect; neither can they without us be made perfect."⁶⁷ Carrying out ordinances for the dead necessitated constructing temples, houses of liminality, if you will, wherein God might dwell with his people as in the days of the children of Israel, who constructed tabernacles in the wilderness that bridged the gulf separating the sacred and the profane and reconciled God and his people.⁶⁸ As such, latter-day temples straddle these two spheres and create a space in which both the temporal and spiritual exist, as Samuel Brown puts it, "in an interwoven cosmic structure of interdependence."⁶⁹

In Dostoevsky's final novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, the character Ivan, an atheistic superman, recounts a story of Christ returning to

67. Doctrine and Covenants 128:18.

68. See Daniel L. Belnap, "'That I May Dwell Among Them': Liminality and Ritual in the Tabernacle," in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, edited by David Rolph Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2016).

69. Samuel Brown, *Joseph Smith's Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 263.

earth at the time of the Spanish Inquisition. Concerning this account, clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson writes,

The returning Savior makes quite a ruckus, as would be expected. He heals the sick. He raises the dead. His antics soon attract attention from the Grand Inquisitor himself, who promptly has Christ arrested and thrown into a prison cell. Later, the Inquisitor pays Him a visit. He informs Christ that he is no longer needed. His return is simply too great a threat to the Church. The Inquisitor tells Christ that the burden he laid on mankind—the burden of existence in faith and truth—was simply too great for mere mortals to bear. The Inquisitor claims that the Church, in its mercy, diluted that message, lifting the demand for perfect Being from the shoulders of its followers, providing them instead with the simple and merciful escapes of faith and the afterlife. That work took centuries, says the Inquisitor, and the last thing the Church needs after all that effort is the return of the Man who insisted that people bear all the weight in the first place. Christ listens in silence. Then, as the Inquisitor turns to leave, Christ embraces him, and kisses him on the lips. The Inquisitor turns white, in shock. Then he goes out, *leaving the cell door open*.⁷⁰

This easily overlooked detail of the Grand Inquisitor leaving the cell door open likewise speaks to an easily overlooked door in the modern Church that remains ajar to the seemingly unwanted or marginal. Even the Grand Inquisitor, the epitome of everything corrupt and deceitful in Christianity, couldn't deny Christ a seat at the table, so to say. The same invitation, spoken or implied, applies to you and me, regardless of where we fall on the spectrum of faith and doubt.

Whether you have or haven't wrestled with such feelings, I urge you to avoid becoming spiritually and intellectually complacent. Take seriously the divine admonition to learn "things which have been, . . . things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and perplexities of the nations . . .

70. Jordan Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (New York: Random House, 2018), 190, italics added.

and a knowledge also of countries and kingdoms.”⁷¹ We are to “become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues and people.”⁷² I take this charge to mean not just learning languages in a linguistic sense but understanding the languages of other faith traditions, whether it be Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, or any number of branches of Christianity. In this regard, I’m reminded of Ukrainian-born Samuel Wohl, who at age fifteen wrote to Leo Tolstoy and explained his spiritual predicament: “I admire you a great deal,” he begins his letter, “but how can I follow your work when every other word is about Christ and I am a Jew?” Tolstoy thoughtfully replied: “The words of Christ are not important because they were said by Christ. On the contrary, they are important because they are true and inscribed on the heart of every human being.” Wohl treasured that advice and later emigrated to America and became a prominent rabbi in the Jewish community.⁷³

I also take this charge to mean saving in our faith tradition “what is eccentric and singular from being sanitized and standardized,”⁷⁴ i.e., becoming acquainted both with the clean, unequivocal narrative that dismisses ambiguity and uncertainty as well as with the blemished, messy narrative that embraces the full spectrum of the human condition and God’s saving grace. Elder Hugh B. Brown, someone with whom I feel a particular kinship both spiritually and ancestrally, captured this expansive manner of thinking when he implored members to “preserve freedom of the mind in the Church and resist all efforts

71. Doctrine and Covenants 88:79.

72. Doctrine and Covenants 90:15.

73. Academic Studies Press, “Irwin Weil Podcast,” YouTube video, 1:00:40, Apr. 10, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5Ibdu7QW0>.

74. Faith Matters Foundation, “Risk-Taking Discipleship – Terryl Givens with Thomas F. Rogers,” YouTube video, 50:30, Nov. 3, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IzoRUw4V1fA>.

to suppress it. The Church is not so much concerned with whether the thoughts of its members are orthodox or heterodox as it is that they shall have thoughts.”⁷⁵

If what I’ve shared with you rings true or if, in the words of Joseph Smith, “it tastes good,”⁷⁶ then I invite you to hold the tension of opposites and pursue the middle way, which is to say to walk into the mystery of God with its attendant safety and insecurity, truth and deception, light and darkness, joy and suffering. By choosing the middle way you likewise choose to participate in a community of believers with whom you may share little in common, but opposites when joined precipitate the birth of a new third, which in Christian vernacular speaks to the manifestation of the Holy Spirit of truth.⁷⁷ As such, emphasizing community-building over individual interests amounts to crucifying, as it were, our ego, to dying to a life of duality preparatory to awakening with eyes that see the interdependence of the universe. When one has this realization, suddenly one is “at once the least significant atom in the universal whole *and* that universal whole,”⁷⁸ hence the esoteric meaning of the familiar saying, “He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.”⁷⁹

But make no mistake, “the path of ease, recognition, and casual sameness is not the way of the cross Christ calls us to bear,” as Patrick

75. Hugh B. Brown, “Freedom of the Mind: An Eternal Quest,” May 13, 1969, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/hugh-b-brown/eternal-quest/>.

76. King Follett Sermon, Nauvoo, Apr. 7, 1844, “History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844],” 1974, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/346>.

77. See M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 75.

78. Watts, *The Two Hands of God*, 241.

79. Matthew 10:39.

Mason writes.⁸⁰ Indeed, the very symbol of the cross reminds us that beams fashioned opposite each other rather than in the same direction bear wholeness, and just as Jesus' body hung on the cross, so too do we as the collective body of Christ hang on the cross when we bear one another's burdens and when we rediscover wholeness in our brokenness.

And so, having obtained the treasure of in-sight and wholeness, we begin the process of becoming as children,⁸¹ shedding the very titles and masks associated with this world of opposites, and returning to the garden of our original wholeness, albeit as conscious or awakened travelers capable of experiencing the eternal in the temporal. The twentieth-century British poet T. S. Eliot eloquently captured this journey in the last of his *Four Quartets*, titled *Little Gidding*:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.⁸²

Such a return to the primordial garden of our souls speaks to a millennial rest, which rest in no way suggests an absence of duality, for if that were the case, we would not use metaphors like a wolf dwelling with a lamb, a leopard lying down with a kid, a calf and a young lion and fatling together, and a child leading them;⁸³ instead, such a metaphor speaks to a reconciliation of our own inner beasts, an unlearning, if you will, of categories and constructs that heretofore divided our inner and outer worlds, and when one has this epiphany, the world that one

80. Patrick Mason, *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2015), 147.

81. See Matthew 18:3.

82. T. S. Eliot, *T. S. Eliot Collected Poems 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1971), 208.

83. See Isaiah 11:6.

thought depended on competing opposites indeed does come to an end. And so, by saying “yes” to the world, words and noises that once gave the illusion of separateness give way to a unifying wholeness and bring to fulfillment the command “Be ye therefore perfect,”⁸⁴ which is to say, be ye therefore an integrated whole. Thus, true integrity transcends moralism and dogmatism in that it recognizes the impossibility of taking sides, except in play or illusion, “for no being lives except in relation to the whole community of being.”⁸⁵

May our exploration lead us to an awakening of the implicit oneness of all things is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

84. Matthew 5:48.

85. Watts, *The Two Hands of God*, 206.

TONY BROWN {tony_brown@byu.edu} is a professor of Russian at Brigham Young University, where he teaches courses in Russian language and culture. He has published in the areas of language policy, second language acquisition, cross-cultural studies, and most recently, sauna ritual in Eastern and Northern Europe. He also directs academic internship programs in Russia, the Baltic states, Germany, Poland, and Central Europe. He and his wife, Emily, live in Provo, Utah.