The Restored Gospel and Applied Christianity

Student Essays in Honor of President David O. McKay

2022

Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature

The publication of these essays was funded by a gift from Obert C. and Grace Tanner

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF CHRISTIAN VALUES IN LITERATURE

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THE RESTORED GOSPEL AND APPLIED CHRISTIANITY:
STUDENT ESSAYS IN HONOR OF PRESIDENT DAVID O. MCKAY

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Printed in the United States of America

Published by the Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah 84602

Cover image of David O. McKay as a young man

Cover design by Bryce Knudsen
Text design by L. Jane Clayson

The contest that generated these essays was funded principally by a gift to Brigham Young University from Obert C. and Grace Tanner. Their contribution makes possible a prestigious annual competition that exemplifies the high ideals of Christian living encouraged at BYU. Their help in magnifying the academic and religious environment on this campus is greatly appreciated.

We express sincere appreciation to the following people: Edward Cutler from the Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature for directing the contest and overseeing the preparation of the essays for publication; the English Department for administering the contest; and the individual faculty members of the English department who judged the entries.

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Acknowledgments

As Mr. Crummles states in *Nicholas Nickleby*, "In every life . . . there is tragedy. It is the one promise life always fulfills." Although the world around us provides abundant experience in hardship, we are well-served if we use these as invitations for reaching out to others. These writers have faced challenging circumstances with grace by assuming responsibility—for their own lives, and for the impact they had on the lives of those around them. As Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote, "There is only one way to salvation, and that is to make yourself responsible for all men's sins. As soon as you make yourself responsible in all sincerity for everything and for everyone, you will see at once that this is really so, and that you are in fact to blame for everyone and for all things." In this world of tragedy and suffering, we can find redemption by realizing that we are our brothers' keepers.

A prime example of this responsibility toward others is the essay by Bradley Reneer entitled "Past Agonies." In Reneer's quest to forgive a bully from his youth, he comes to the realization that the bully's life was harder than he initially suspected and that he (Reneer) had tremendous advantages. "Like other kids, the bullies in my school were trying to survive, trying to be somebody, trying to assert their worth, trying to find a place in a confusing world. I now wonder if my scholastic advantages made me a type of bully, an intellectual classroom bully. If I could go back and watch myself, I might be appalled" (9). Reneer eventually realizes through thoughtful self-reflection his responsibility to another. He understands that we are "a spiritual community of many conjointly living people" (Fitzpatrick) whose actions create ripple effects on those around us. Through thoughtful self-reflection, Reneer is able to forgive.

The responsibility to forgive can be a tremendous challenge. In Fleur Van Woerkom's "My Dad Is a Stranger I'm Getting to Know," Van Woerkom struggles to overcome her feelings of hurt and abandonment towards a father who left *her* family to start another. While attempting to be as generous as possible towards him, she recognizes that she must look to God as her example: "There are many things that I willingly offer my Heavenly Father, but I do not yet know how to give my father a peace offering in the form of forgiveness—not after the spiritual and emotional abuse I witnessed within my parents' marriage. I don't even know if I desire to forgive my dad. Maybe, if Heavenly Father forgives him —*when* He forgives him—He could teach me how to try" (15). It is through taking responsibility for her part in the parent-child relationship that Van Woerkom finds the possibility for healing.

When in the midst of a tragedy, it can feel like God Himself has abandoned us. In Sydney Gant's "The Dictionary for When Things Don't Go as Planned" she outlines her battle with physical and mental illness. "Who is worthy enough

to endure the sight of God? Certainly not you. At least, that's what you believed. . . . You put yourself in a place where you believed God could not find you. . . . You did not feel worthy to see His hand in your life. Ah, but you were found" (27). As Gant is found, she is healed. And as the days treat her more kindly, she helps "new souls in [her] life that struggle with what [she] did" (30–31) thus extending the circle of compassionate responsibility.

There are two other authors with essays in this volume who wrestled with the hardships of possessing a mortal body. First, Mauri Pollard Johnson details her struggles with anorexia in "All Things Both Temporal and Spiritual" and how the lessons she learned through her body expanded her faith: "Although [the sacrament] does not feel like a cure-all for either my body or spiritual dysmorphia, it does feel like a balm, a brief pain reliever, ibuprofen for my aching soul" (40). Adrienne Powell uses dance to overcome her struggles with physical and emotional pain in "Dancing to God." Along with many of the other authors, Powell recognizes that she can use her trials to lift and bless others. "During this time [of growth] I also started learning other ways to connect my body and my mind. I tried yoga. I went to therapy. I studied the scriptures intently and tried to understand how God felt about me. As I learned to love myself, I learned how to feel God's love for me, and as I felt His love for me, I began to feel it for others. I do know that this gift of a body has given me new ways to love, new ways to create, new ways to build" (47–48).

Jamie Lewis Holt grapples with the loss of both her younger sister and her mother, but in the processing of that pain comes to an appreciation of "Unpunctuated Love," or love freely and steadily given. She writes, "I am at a loss for words to describe something that has to be felt not heard by repetition or examination but by subjecting oneself to the miserable contracts of life and love in order to understand why just two minutes can feel like an eternity sometimes" (56). She savors cuddles with her son, the ironing of a dress so her mother can rest, the unspoken language between siblings. It can be through these mundane and even "miserable contracts" with others in our lives that we learn to love.

Another essayist who confronts the issue of our responsibility to each other is Holden d'Evegnee in "The Fleshy Tables of the Heart." While on his mission to the Ivory Coast, his trainer and his branch president kill a goat in order to supply the elders with food. While on the surface d'Evegnee tells this tale in jest, the experience was clearly tragic for him. "It becomes harder and harder to be true to the animal whose blood is on my hands" (62). He realizes that it is through embracing our responsibility to our brothers and sisters that we are made holy. "As a missionary, I wasn't divorced from reality; I was in constant communion with it. I came to realize that holiness is not a removal from reality, but the act of embracing it, blood and all" (63).

Someone who also felt this responsibility and concern for others is Jacob Liljenquist in "Blank Space." On his mission he receives a revelation in which he is told, "I need to forget myself and help others as much as possible, because focusing on what I can't do is selfish and gets me nowhere. I'm going to do nothing but love and serve these people and missionaries" (76). The Apostle Paul reminds us in Galatians that as we bear one another's burdens, we fulfill the very "law of Christ" (6.2). Alison Linnell in her essay "On Love Languages" describes her desire to make sure her husband and children felt loved by cooking meals for them. "Food became a tangible way for me to express love" (84). Linnell continues to consider the ways that God expresses love to His children, and how we might more readily recognize that divine concern in our lives. "I find comfort in the fact that God also uses food to express love. And even though I am struggling to understand His love, or maybe it is because of that, I find hope in it too. . . . I wonder if I am asking for miracles, and God instead wants me to look for how I hungered for help and He met my needs, how He filled me with His love during difficult times" (84–85).

Whether our difficult times involve something large like a death or something seemingly small like people mispronouncing our names, if our challenges are important to us, they are important to God. Eventually Soonwye Lucero in her essay "Hey Google" comes to terms with others' inability to pronounce her name correctly and finds such occurrences teaching moments: "[I]nstead of becoming frustrated that I could not fit in, I was happy to have a moment to share with other people what my name meant, where it comes from, and how I got it. I now see sharing my name as an opportunity for them to see who I am and what I believe in" (98). She now knows her name has a sacred beginning and a responsibility to share that truth with others.

Maggie Petersen also senses God's love for her in "The Sun Is Coming Back." In a recurring dream about the Second Coming she feels "His presence like He's in the room with" her (103). When she was in darkness, she would feel her "way to the door to find the [light]. . . . I would offer a prayer, my chest still lit up inside me, and those were the times when the spirit inside me would simmer to peace. . . . I've collected the gospel in little sips my whole life, and I'll continue to do so with faith, because I know the Son is coming back" (106–07). The Light of the World has brought happiness and peace to Petersen's life, even in times of darkness. Like Petersen and the other authors in this volume, when we feel God's love, we can reach out and share that gift with others.

The last part of Mr. Crummles' quote in *Nicholas Nickleby* is this: "Happiness is a gift and the trick is not to expect it, but to delight in it when it comes. And to add to other people's store of it." This captures the essence of what the authors describe in these essays. When these essayists experienced pain, they have done what they could to improve their own lives, and also to brighten the lives of those around them.

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Nicholas Nickleby. Directed by Douglas McGrath, MGM, 2002.

BRADLEY RENEER

Past Agonies

> That is what mortals misunderstand. They say of some temporal suffering, "No future bliss can make up for it," not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory. (Lewis 67)

When I first read *The Great Divorce* I could not imagine why C. S. Lewis thought an agony could turn into a glory. How could it? I knew that some of my experiences were too frightening and humiliating.

From fourth through eighth grade when I lived in the small town of Patagonia, Arizona, I was always nervous at school, going to and from school, and meeting certain kids anywhere outside of school. The only places outside my house where I felt safe were at church (with my parents close by), hiking with my dog (far away from people), and at the library (which was usually empty except for my older brother, the librarian, and me). When we left Patagonia I was thirteen and bitter. I considered my experiences there an "agony." I considered the bullies my enemies, especially one whom I'll call Harry—the usual ring leader of mischief making.

Over time I felt increasingly uncomfortable with my old resentments and bitterness. About forty-five years after I moved from Patagonia I wrote a short story based on the anger and fear Harry caused me. The protagonist is a young college student, a twenty-three-year-old fantasy version of myself, who returns to a small town to confront a fictionalized version of Harry. My protagonist has the courage to face his tormentor. He has grown tall and strong and is going to exact revenge by punching Harry in the face. The bitter protagonist is eager to prove he isn't a wimp, a coward, a victim. Like me, he needs closure on childhood trauma and he is determined to transform the humiliation and fear into a vengeful triumph. The bully leveraged his advantages of size and strength to hurt and belittle, but now the tables have turned.

But I struggled to find the right ending to my short story. Does my protagonist punch Harry or find some other way to humiliate him before deciding to forgive? How do I resolve the bitterness? Nothing I tried was satisfactory.

> One morning, when I was in sixth grade, I walked up the school hill from my house. The previous day during recess the other boys were laughing at a story, which I think Harry told, of a boy getting pantsed—and his pants run up the school flagpole. If I'd forgotten the previous day's story, then seeing the flag twitching in the hint of a breeze would have reminded me. We had to stay outside on the playground until the bell rang and a teacher opened the front doors, when we would rush inside so we wouldn't be counted late. This routine did not help the youngest, smallest, and wimpiest kid in the sixth grade (me) when he was trying to avoid a bully.

The year before moving to Patagonia my parents had put me in a private school, which gave me an academic advantage over many of the students in Patagonia Elementary. I was the sort of "good" kid who sat quietly in class, did his homework, followed the rules, and frequently raised his hand to answer questions. In Mrs. Schartz's fifth-grade class I was proud to be the only one to correctly pronounce the way numbers are written on a check. I thought it was an amazing feat of scholastic achievement that showed off my superiority—and it is now a nearly useless skill. I worked hard to maintain my superiority.

The bully ruled the playground but in the class room I ruled by being the perfect student, most of the time. I feared that my image was permanently tarnished when in seventh grade, Harry and his friend took my social studies homework and copied it. I was devastated when the teacher noticed and I was punished along with them.

That same year our class of about thirty students stood around the librarian's desk and checkout counter. The librarian saw a rerun of *East of Eden*. She lectured us about how the bad son, played by James Dean, turns out to be good and how the good son turns out to be bad. I swear she was looking straight at me, the perfect student. *So the school librarian thinks I'm going to turn out bad? What's she got against me?* I was annoyed by her prediction.

> On my way to school I usually left the main sidewalk and followed a short, twisted dirt trail through the mesquite trees to the old school entrance. I surveyed the schoolyard for danger and there it was—a dozen sixth grade boys. I paused between the two rusty iron posts that had been part of the entrance gate when the school was built sixty years earlier. Usually the boys were spread out over the playground but

> this morning they were all between the gate and the front steps. Next to the sidewalk, halfway from the gate to the steps, stood the flagpole. The boys were "acting natural." I'd learned to detect the "acting natural" that came before the attack.
>
> Every boy was walking around with covert glances in my direction—watching me while pretending not to watch me. Perhaps some of the boys were not eager to participate, but they were certainly glad not to be the de-pantsing target—and they certainly didn't dare warn me because that would make them the new target. I don't remember if there were many girls hanging out nearby, but at the back of my mind was the terror of even one of them seeing me without my pants. Just one would be humiliation enough, and I knew that the rest of the sixth grade girls, actually the whole school, and maybe the whole town, would quickly hear about it.

In my short story about returning for revenge the protagonist, as he wanders the streets, tries to ignore the good memories that invade his thoughts. He doesn't want to remember anything good; he wants to fuel his anger and harden his resolve for revenge. He doesn't want to think about friends or kind teachers.

A year and a half after writing the story, I still struggled with the ending. On a trip with my wife to Sierra Vista to visit family, I decided to make the short drive to Patagonia to go sightseeing. I visited the historic train depot, the public library that the Women's Club had kept running, the nearby ghost town of Harshaw, and the community church where we went

to summer Bible school. I drove past our home, a red brick house built on the toxic, lead-contaminated site of the old silver smelter. I was surprised at how much things looked and felt the same after forty-five years. The old elementary school, now the town museum, is an old Spanish-style school house built in 1914, and still has the red sandstone foundation, thick, white-washed adobe walls, tall red-framed windows, tile roof, and mission style bell tower.

I wondered if I should look up Harry. Was it fair to finish the short story, even though fictionalized, without knowing where he was in his story? I felt a nudge, which I believe was from God, to find him. But I was worried that I'd find him living in an alley in a rundown shack like the one a town drunk used to live in. While we were growing up, Harry's mother had struggled with addiction and his father had abandoned their family. Harry had little supervision. In grade school he bragged about staying up until 3:00 a.m. and about the alcohol and drug use in his home. I sincerely hoped he was doing well and tried to clear away my negative expectations, but I kept imagining him living in squalor.

I decided to ask a woman who was working in front of her house if she knew where Harry lived. I was a bit taken aback when she said, "Who wants to know?" I explained that I lived in Patagonia back in the '70s and that he was a classmate. It may have been a natural suspicion of outsiders but it worried me to see her reaction. I chatted with her for a moment, demonstrating that I knew the town, and she gave me directions.

> I stood by the old iron gate post and studied my options. The old concrete sidewalk that ran to the six wide steps in front of the school doors passed through the pack of "acting natural" boys. There was no way I'd make it to the doors without the pack closing in on me. I

> wished I was already inside in the safety of Mr. Rogers' classroom.
>
> To my left was a juniper tree next to the old fence line. I could try climbing the tree but probably wouldn't be fast enough. There was a swing set near the juniper tree and a bit farther the slide and monkey bars near the concrete basketball court. Everywhere else was gravelly ground with a few spots of sparse, worn grass struggling to be green. I didn't see any safe places. I considered running home but instinctively knew that would only make it worse during recess. Running away told them they had won and they would just continue targeting me. I had to face this.

Instead of a sad, rundown, ill-kept place I found a clean, orderly, Spanish-style home with a horse inside the fenced area next to the driveway. I walked up the drive and found a young boy sitting in front of the house. I gave him my name and said I was looking for my old classmate Harry. I waited nervously while he ran inside. I was almost as nervous about the dog that was suspiciously sniffing me as I was about whether this was Harry's house and how he might receive me. Those years of soaking in fear every time he turned his attention on me seemed to resurface, whispering old scripts from the dark recesses of my memory.

> The school bell should ring soon. If I can stay free that long then there would be a teacher at the doors that would surely help me if I were attacked, right? I didn't have a lot of confidence that the adults cared but they couldn't ignore a group of boys trying to pants someone, could they? I looked in all directions, making sure no

> one snuck up from behind. They seemed to decide that my hesitation meant I wasn't going to make things easy for them. They began circling closer. They knew that when you move too fast or get too close to your prey it bolts. They carefully eased in closer, testing the limit.

I had given up much of the bitterness that had haunted me. I had tried to forgive and forget. But as I stood in Harry's driveway and nervously waited I wondered how he would react at seeing me again after forty-five years. Maybe he wouldn't even remember me.

He came around the side of his house and gave me a quizzical look. At least I thought it was him. It was hard to tell without the long hair. Now he had a crew cut. Once when I had a crew cut he gave me the nickname "bald eagle." Hesitantly I introduced myself. He seemed surprised and stared at me for a long moment. "Yeah, I remember you," he finally said. He invited me into his home.

We talked for nearly two hours. I learned that right out of high school he and a friend, a guy I once had a rock fight with, got drunk and were in a car accident in which his friend was killed. Harry began a new life, married a good woman, and they moved to get away from the bad influences in Patagonia. After creating new patterns of living they returned, because Patagonia is a great town and they wanted to be close to family for their children.

We laughed about old times. Neither of us brought up pantsing or copied social studies homework. He told me about some of our other classmates. We laughed about the first year that the junior high had a football team. We didn't have a locker room so we had to change on the gym stage. Lots of students passed through the gym to other parts of the school and we changed quickly while hoping that no one would open the curtain.

> Like a hunting pack they ran toward me. There were too many to evade on the playground. So I did the only thing I could think of—I sat on the ground by the rusty iron gate post. I put my arms and legs around the post and held on as tight as I could.
>
> I clung to the post while the boys pulled at my arms and legs. Harry and others punched my arms, to get me to let go of the post. I didn't get a bloody nose, not that time. The fear of being pantsed was much greater than the pain of being punched. If they had worked together I'd have been doomed. I remember hearing, through the chaos, Harry's familiar laughter. He was having a great time.

Harry reminded me that his time on the football team was short. "I did that for a few weeks until I was kicked off." It was a recurring theme in our conversation. He was in the Cub Scout den that my mother created with the help of the Methodist minister—for a few weeks. He went to Vacation Bible School—for a few days. I think it must have been painful. He laughed about it.

As we chatted in his clean, orderly, home, with his grandson listening to us reminisce, I recalled a moment in school when he was laughing, which I had experienced with fear and had seen as malicious. But I began to see him in a new way. His twinkling, mischievous eyes held no evil intent.

When his wife came home he introduced me as his "friend from school." When he said "friend" something in my heart shoved off the last layers of resentment, pain, and fear. In that glorious moment I felt a peace that would have amazed the frightened boy with his arms and legs wrapped around an iron post clinging, so he thought, for his life.

> I clung to the post, like a sailor lashed to the mast in the midst of a hurricane, with a sea of boys swirling around me. The bell rang. The storm subsided. Boys stepped away, slightly disappointed, and walked towards the school. I stood, shaking, brushed off as much rust and dirt as I could and walked at a distance behind the last of them. The teacher at the door gave me a suspicious glance as I entered the school, as if I'd been running an illegal gambling ring out by the old gate posts. I felt a great sense of relief when I reached the inside of the school. I had survived.

Like other kids, the bullies in my school were trying to survive, trying to be somebody, trying to assert their worth, trying to find a place in a confusing world. I now wonder if my scholastic advantages made me a type of bully, an intellectual classroom bully. If I could go back and watch myself I might be appalled. Perhaps in trying to maintain my superiority I put down the students who were behind me academically. I know that I didn't realize what a great advantage I had over Harry because I had two involved (if imperfect) parents who encouraged my studies. Perhaps the fear of being put back a grade is greater than the fear of seeing your pants hanging on the flagpole.

Looking back, I think there was something to what the school librarian said. The kid who was considered the "bad kid" now shines. Or maybe I misunderstood her. Maybe she was looking straight at me to let me know that a "bad" kid, arrogant and self-satisfied, could end up "good." I have reason to hope.

I'm grateful that Harry invited me in. I'm grateful that we laughed together. The boy that I once thought was my enemy called me "friend." Before I left, Harry and his wife told me their daughter was seriously ill. "Can I pray for her?" I asked,

not knowing their religious inclinations. His wife replied, "Of course. That is how we have made it this far."

My short story still doesn't have an ending. I do know that my protagonist won't be punching anyone. How could he? Perhaps it will end with him realizing that he needs to find Harry not for revenge but because he needs a friend. I believe God led me back when I was ready. I didn't realize that waiting on his driveway I was waiting for acceptance and forgiveness from my old classmate. Forty-five years is not too long to wait for the right ending to a story, an ending where agony turns into glory.

> The . . . past begins to change so that his forgiven sins and remembered sorrows take on the quality of Heaven . . . And that is why . . . the Blessed will say "We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven." (Lewis 67–68)

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FLEUR VAN WOERKOM

My Dad Is a Stranger I'm Getting to Know

My dad is a stranger I'm getting to know. Only he isn't, not really. Strangers are outsiders, unknowns, and I know my dad well. Too well. No, he isn't really a stranger. That's just what I have to tell myself when I see him now, because imagining that I don't know anything about his past is the only way I can involve him in my future.

• • •

"He wants to see you," my sister told me last December, after my dad dropped her off at my mom's house and she ran into my arms. After she'd escaped my embrace and run to her room I gazed out the door, wrapping my arms tightly around my ribs in an attempt to press down the feelings I get whenever I have to talk to him now. I needed my hot angry words to stay hidden within my fleshy cage of bones. Leaving the front door open, I walked down the steps. The ground was cold, and I lifted my heels so that only the tips of my metatarsals touched the salty ice. My dad stood in the driveway, a look of anxious hope in his eyes. I stopped two feet away from him, and willed myself to make small talk.

"How was work this week?"

"Good, thanks for asking. How did your finals go?"

"Good. They were fine."

He held out a paper bag with the top neatly folded down. "This is for you, the ornaments you asked for, and Rachel brought some chocolates back from England."

I didn't want to accept anything from his new wife, but I liked British chocolates, so I took the bag from his hand. Feeling through the paper, I identified a small, flat heart shape. In my text the day before, I'd asked him for my Nutcracker ornaments. I wanted them to hang on my mom's tree, where I was living, not on his tree at a house I never visited. *The Nutcracker ornaments, and other family ones that you don't want*, I'd written. From the shape of the heart, it seemed he understood what I was specifically asking for.

I didn't know what else to say. I should have asked him how the babies were doing, the ones he took care of at the hospital, but my fingers were feeling the shape of a heart through a papery skin and my arms were tired from pressing the heat of my anger deep into my chest.

"I, uh, when I was flying to work I had a layover in southern California. From the airplane I could see some of the beaches where we used to go when you were little," he said.

He was trying so hard.

"That's fun," I said. I wondered who his *we* included. Just the two of us? Impossible. Any memory he had of me at the beach would've had to include my mom. But he couldn't say that. Not after the divorce, not after he married his new wife, not after he started treating my mom like a stranger.

• • •

Of course, I do have *some* memories of my dad that I can think back on fondly. One of my earliest was in France, when we were visiting my dad's brother and his family. The restaurant

wall to my left was either yellow or yellowing, and the lacy hem of my dress hung over my four-and-a-half-year-old legs. I do not remember if this moment came after I danced to the monkey grinder music on the cobblestone streets of Mont-Saint-Michel, or before I stood on top of an old castle tower, my tiny arms stretching to catch the wind. Truthfully, I do not know if those are really my memories at all, or just grainy pictures that my mind has created from stories I've been told.

But I *do* know the wall was yellow, and my dad sat across from me, resting his arms on the plastic-covered tablecloth, telling me he *did not* want to eat the mussels that I so kindly offered him. I remember squeezing lemons onto the slimy shells and holding them up to his face, begging him to try slurping the newfound tastiness I had just discovered. His disdain for seafood hadn't yet cloned itself in my tastebuds. I ate all the mussels he didn't eat, and afterwards my aunt gave me a perfumed wet cloth to clean my hands. And my dad smiled at me, his daughter who danced and ate meat out of shells.

• • •

Did my Heavenly Father smile at me too? As I licked the lemon juice off my fingers, was His smile wistful, knowing I would one day struggle to kindly offer my dad anything—especially forgiveness? In Leviticus it says, "if ye offer a sacrifice of peace offerings unto the Lord, ye shall offer it at your own will" (19.5). There are many things that I willingly offer my Heavenly Father, but I do not yet know how to give my father a peace offering in the form of forgiveness—not after the spiritual and emotional abuse I witnessed within my parents' marriage. I don't even know if I desire to forgive my dad. Maybe, if Heavenly Father forgives him—*when* He forgives him—He could teach me how to try.

• • •

My dad excels at offering. He offers strict obedience to many of God's laws, life-saving knowledge to the babies he cares for at the hospital, and advice where he thinks it is needed. He offers me gifts—material things, stuff that I don't need—because he can't offer me what I want the most: acknowledgment of his faults, an apology for how his spiritually and emotionally abusive words and actions have hurt my mom, and recognition that his actions have affected me as well. He does not offer me what I really want, but he does offer. Am I too quick to judge the appearance of my dad's offerings?

When I was still young enough to see my dad without his backdrop of faults, he gave me a small sculpture of a girl standing next to a dog, which someone had given him when he lived in Japan. The clay itself is rather shapeless, but the front is layered in purple and gold paint strokes for the girl, a red collar and black nose for the dog. The person who gave it to him had told him to give it to his future daughter, so he gave it to me. An offering planned before I was born. I wonder what my Heavenly Father planned to offer me even before I was born. For how long did He plan to offer me my dad as a father? For how long has He known that I would need forgiveness for being unable to forgive?

• • •

One day, when I was twelve and we lived by the ocean, I followed my dad through a door with advertisements pressing like farmed fish through its glass. While my dad approached the counter, I looked at the spice packets hanging from pegs on the wall. I rubbed my finger along the dusty crevices of the candy dispenser, and felt my pocket for a quarter I didn't have. That place wasn't the meat section of Safeway—it was a *real* butcher shop. We went there because the owner was a man who went to our church, and my dad always tried to support the people he knew—a lesson that he's offered me throughout

my life. He ordered a cut of meat, and I studied the diagram of a cow, which hung behind the brightly lit glass caskets. I picked up the white paper package as my dad paid, but by the time I reached the door I could see a slim trickle of red snaking through the paper folds and towards my fingers. Without my having to ask, my dad took the package from my grasp so I did not have to be scared of blood touching my skin.

• • •

No, my dad isn't really a stranger. I've known him for twenty-two years—not as long as I've known my Heavenly Father, but long enough to complicate the matter of forgiveness. I know that Heavenly Father can forgive regardless of time. He can forgive anyone who desires forgiveness—but I don't know if my dad desires my forgiveness, or if he even understands that there are actions and words of his that need to be forgiven.

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When my parents got divorced, I was serving a mission in New York. The morning of my eleventh Monday in Queens, I stood in a corner laundromat and turned on my phone. There were two emails waiting for me that had been sent late the night before—my mother explaining how all the spiritual and emotional abuse that my father had inflicted on her throughout their entire marriage was adding up to too much, and my father sharing his view of the situation, as well as his hope that my mom would realize "it wasn't that big of a deal." I didn't feel much emotion as I read my parents' short explanations; it took me maybe two minutes to read them both. Then I turned off my phone, jangled the quarters in the blue detergent cap I was holding in my right hand, and listened to my companion as she talked to the woman folding clothes by the foggy window. I stared at the wet clothes spinning until it was time to

put them in the dryer, and my hand was steady as I pushed two quarters into the slot.

The next morning, I walked with my companion to the church building that stood six stories high, twenty-three sidewalk squares away from the corner where a man sold cheap perfume. We went into a quiet room to study our scriptures, and I immediately knelt down to press my forehead into the padded blue fabric of my chair. I was supposed to be praying; I was supposed to be talking to my Heavenly Father. I don't remember if I prayed—I don't remember if I told Heavenly Father how I felt, or if I tried to push all feelings out of my mind. I just know that I waited for all my tears to silently soak the cloth between my nose and my forehead before heaving my body up. When my companion's stare seemed to ask why my prayer had been so long, I offered no answer. I just opened my scriptures and stared at a page number until we had to leave.

I never told her what had happened.

• • •

I told Heavenly Father what happened, eventually, but I didn't tell anyone else for a long time. Now, a couple years later, there are different versions of the story that I tell to different people. Sometimes it's a one sentence explanation: *My parents got divorced.*

If it's not the first time I'm meeting someone, I might say: *My dad had a lot of control issues that led to abuse, and my mom finally decided it wasn't okay.*

Then there's the real version, which is easiest for me to share if I know the person I'm sharing it with has an empathetic heart. But that real version, the one my Heavenly Father knows, is not something I am practiced at speaking out loud; it is not heard by many.

• • •

That night last December, when my dad handed me the brown paper bag filled with ornaments and chocolates, I gave him a half hug. No, less than that. A quarter hug. He told me he loved me, and then I tiptoed back up the stairs, clutching the paper bag in my hand. After I stepped inside and locked the door, my sister ran over to show me a picture that she'd been drawing. It had wobbly purple-marker lines and big, shining eyes that matched her own. Voicing my admiration for her art, I pulled the heart-shaped ornament out by its loop of golden thread. It hung from my finger, the glass-like plastic almost weightless.

"That's pretty," my sister said.

"It is."

"Are you going to hang it on the tree?"

"No," I told her as I buried it back beneath the conflict of chocolates. I didn't want her to look long enough to read the words inscribed on the heart in curling gold letters. I didn't want her to ask what they meant, or why I'd asked my dad for it but didn't want to hang it on the tree with the other ornaments that were in the bag with the chocolates.

Our First Christmas Together 1997

Maybe my dad hadn't understood what I'd really been asking for when he returned that ornament with the others. Maybe he'd just wanted to get rid of it, and saw offering it to me as an opportunity to do so. I know it's unfair to compare my dad to Heavenly Father, but my Heavenly Father always knows what I'm really asking for, even when He doesn't give it to me. Right now, I am asking for empathy from my dad. Is it wrong to require something in order to forgive?

• • •

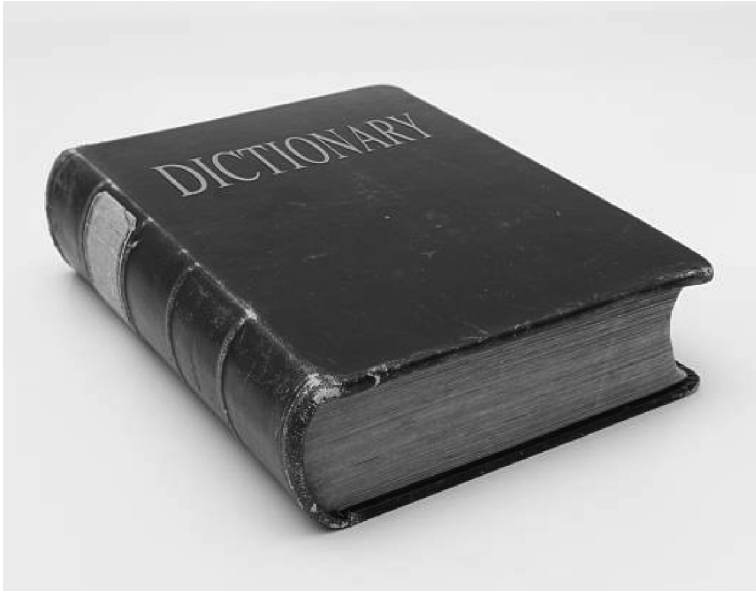
A few weeks after he gave me the ornament, I saw that I'd missed a call from him. For the first time in months, I called him back. We chatted about my classes and his plane ride to

work. Safe topics. I didn't mention my anxious feelings, the ones that build whenever I talk to him. My dad doesn't believe in anxiety.

As we started to hang up, after only a couple moments of stilted conversation, I heard his voice start to quiver. My finger trembled above the red splotch on the screen, itching to end the call.

"I love you, Dad," I finally said. Because those are the words I should be able to say to him. Those are the words I hadn't been able to return that night in December, when we briefly talked in the snowy driveway and I clutched a heavy yet weightless plastic heart wrapped in a brown paper bag. Maybe those words are all that I can offer him right now—even if they feel empty, even if I can barely do more than whisper them. Not forgiveness, but a short-spoken sentence that might someday be true. When he said those same words back to me over the phone, I wondered if that was all he could offer right then, too. Not the kind of apology I wanted, not acknowledgment of the pain he has caused. But a short-spoken sentence, one that he believes to be true.

Maybe that was enough.


DICTIONARY

SYDNEY GANT

The Dictionary for When Things Don't Go as Planned

Adult /əˈdəlt/ fear, *noun*

It was the morning of your eighteenth birthday that you first got sick. Just a stomach bug, you were sure of it. Just a stomach bug that kept you out of school for two weeks, and the only reason you went back was to make sure you didn't fail your classes. Even then, you had to leave early a few times a week anyway—it's hard to stay when you feel guilty for making a mess in the bathroom.

You were almost an adult now, despite still living in your parents' house and being a senior in high school. You had new unspoken responsibilities, expectations to follow, bills to pay. No one told you any of this but you knew it was coming. One day you'd wake up and have to leave everything and everyone behind with no rhyme or reason and there would be no time to cry. You stayed up late thinking about being older. It never helped your stomach.

Colonoscopy /kōləˈnäskəpē/ medical, *noun*

Four months later you were down thirty pounds, and sixteen different medical tests had come back negative. Your stomach still hurt; you were still losing weight. You thought the procedure

itself would be the worst part, but you were swiftly corrected. In order for the test to yield results, patients had to drink a medicine (they called it "prep") that emptied their stomach and intestines completely. It tasted like the world was ending. But you were desperate for answers. Desperate enough to drink two gallons of prep instead of just one, which took three days of preparation and starving, not two. The first day? Your mother poured you a glass, handed you a straw, and told you to drink. The very stench of it made you wish you'd never gotten sick in the first place! You could hardly take a drop on your tongue before your body made you quit. You made your mother call the doctors to cancel. They said almost everyone called, and you just had to tough it out. Your father came home that night, and reluctantly you took the tiniest sips while watching movies with him. By 11:00 p.m., you'd had hardly a third of the *first* gallon. The first. Your mother outlined all the details of what you still needed to consume, and your stomach revolted! She let you be done for the day.

The only reason you made it through the second day was because of your mother, who had prayed for a way to give it to you so you could keep it down. She, in her moment of inspiration, stirred orange flavoring into both gallons, and every hour measured out the amount you needed to take. Rather than letting you control the amount, she poured a shot glass and *watched* you drink it. She was proud of you.

When it was finally over, you slept so well. Until the results came back that nothing was wrong. Another negative test—another reason for people to believe there was nothing wrong with you after all, and you had been living a lie for months. A lie that took all of your weight away.

Depression /dəˈpreSH(ə)n/ mental illness, all-consuming, *noun*

You thought the psychiatrist was lying when he toyed with the idea of depression. He didn't say you *did* have it—he said

you *might*. You laughed; you couldn't! You were your parents' smiling, happy daughter. The reliable one when things were bad. Even during your sickness, you tried your best to smile and remain optimistic. Through all the negative tests and umbrella diagnoses of IBS and anxiety, you thought you'd still been happy. But, in the end, he was right. These months had changed you.

You didn't just quit writing, you hated it. You hated the old songs you listened to, you hated your family for reaching out, you hated your body, you hated that the world was run by money, and you hated that everyone else had their lives together except you. You thought they stared as you walked by, mocking your doubts and illness. They couldn't hear how much you cried into your pillow.

For some reason, none of the pills worked. They actually made things *worse*. You didn't think it could get worse, especially after moving out of your parents' home into the real world of college. But you were willing to try whatever medicine could fix you.

Over the next however many months, you stopped seeing the people around you. You couldn't see what lay ahead—you couldn't really see behind you, either. Dark water began to rise, and it scared you. Water was supposed to be cleansing and calm, but this water was erasing you, piece by piece.

This was no baptism. This was a shipwreck, an accident, a mistake. It rose to your waist, and you realized just how much weight you lost . . . how much you weren't eating. The water rose to your chest, and you felt the cracks in your smile give way—you couldn't pretend to be happy anymore. It rose to your throat. You knew you weren't yourself, but you didn't have the energy to fight the rising tide. You just wanted to lie down and surrender to the current. The water reached your chin, your eyes, the crown of your head. You fought for your life, desperately trying to keep your head up, to not lose hope and to

retain your happiness, and then a blank screen. Nothing but static. Everything was made of white noise. Where . . . where did you go?

Eeyore /ee-aw/ favorite, *noun*

While you were locked in your static room, an idea snuck in. There was a section of the supermarket dedicated to plushies for babies and very young children, but it caught your eye. You ran your hands through the toys and found one of your best friends. A perfectly sized green dinosaur that you named Dan.

He reminded you of a childhood friend, accompanied by all his friends in the Hundred Acre Wood. When you were a kid, Eeyore would bring you so much comfort and love through your parents' small TV screen. You decided to find that band of animal friends again. And, oh, how he made you cry. It wasn't just that he felt the same way you did, or how he loved the pink bow on his tail despite his pessimism and exhaustion. It was his friends: they never asked him to change or try to be happy for them. They simply loved him. And you really, really needed to feel that.

Faith /fāTH/ feeling, *noun*

There wasn't a day you began to feel better, that you were "cured" or "fixed." But there was a change, somewhere in those static months, where you didn't feel quite so guilty, and it was a little easier to get out of bed. To take a shower. To go back to church—once a month at first, then every other week, then every week. To do your homework. And then suddenly your second semester of college was over, and you hadn't failed any of your classes. You were grateful. Maybe it was best if you didn't remember the details of those dark months. Even if it meant lost knowledge, you didn't have to remember the pain. Only waking up and tasting the air again. Finally lifting your head above the

water. Accepting the help and love of the people around you in simple stages. They really, really loved you, but the static had made it hard to understand them. You began to see other people for who they were, and they were very kind to you.

God /gäd/ King, home, light, The End, *noun*

Who is worthy enough to endure the sight of God? Certainly not you. At least, that's what you believed. There was no earth-shattering witness of an angel, or the Spirit testifying to you in profound ways, leaving you dumb or blind as the prophets of old. No, you did not need such a grand display. The faith inside you never left when you first became ill. It did not vanish, but lay dormant within you, washed over by the river of self-sabotage and illness. When you first became sick, your testimony and love for the gospel (and pretty much anything else you were passionate about) got shoved to the side. You were overwhelmed by your body's innate desire to stay alive. There was no room to dwell on spiritual matters while you were convincing yourself to make it to tomorrow.

You put yourself in a place where you believed God could not find you. You hid from Him in any way you could—not because you were full of sin—but because you were ashamed that you couldn't afford to give any energy to Him. You did not feel worthy to see His hand in your life.

Ah, but you were found. How did it happen? You can't remember the details. You could feel the dark waters rising again, the fears and doubts creeping in, and then a light turned on and washed out all the water. You felt *seen* for the first time in years. Someone *knew* you. Really, truly. It was hard for you to believe, but it was real. He was real. So was His Son. You took His outstretched hands. What peace came with that embrace! What tears and questions and light and . . . and . . . there was no judgment. It was going to be okay. You knew it was going to be okay.

It wasn't just that day that His light affected you. No, you knew it would change your whole life for the better. Even if you didn't live every day in the most perfect way you could, even if you couldn't go to the temple, even if you missed studying for a week or so. *That's* what the Atonement was really for. Not just the big mistakes, but for always striving to be better. And if you just put forth your best effort, He would make up the rest. You just had to keep going.

Peace /pēs/ relief, ***noun***

You continued to fight your way through the mud and white noise of your life, picking up what some would consider childish habits and routines. You learned to stop listening to the expectations of others long before this; kids' movies made you happy. They made you smile despite the circumstances. You began to buy your favorite ice cream flavor once a week. You waved your arms around in your favorite oversized hoodie and sang Disney songs in the shower when no one was home. You started writing again (you did it!); you leaned away from your horror fantasies and wrote romance. Two romance pieces, actually. They didn't change your negative opinions towards the genre, but you had fun. One was inspired by your favorite band, who you didn't hate anymore.

You actually missed your family and realized just how much they loved you. You really wanted to see them again, and after flying home for the summer, you hugged your parents tightly.

Relapse /ˈrēˌlaps/ guilt, ***verb***

You believed things were getting better. You were at home, not alone with your thoughts, had a stable job, could see your friends again. No one could deny your progress. But your clothes were still damp from the dark waters. The pain couldn't be erased overnight. One morning while you were working, you made a mistake. You spilled a container of pepperoni on the

floor. That was okay, mistakes happened all the time. But as soon as you were done cleaning up, you spilled a container of chicken. Sounds silly, but you were devastated. It dragged you back down to the dark waters, and you ran as fast as you could into the walk-in freezer and suppressed your sobs. You wished you had gone through with your static plans to leave your life and family behind. Wait, what? You couldn't believe what you just thought of! After all the progress and healing, you went straight back down to where you were before. It shook you to your core. Was any of the effort and progress really worth it?

Scripture /ˈskripCHər/ gift, *noun*

How long had it been since you sat with your parents, reading together the words of God? It was something you always looked forward to when you were little, but when you left home, that routine stayed behind. And it certainly didn't resurface while you were ill. The very thought of that holy habit made you feel guilty, not just to your parents, but to God. There was no chance you could start over *again*; it wasn't worth it!

It took all the effort and courage you could muster, but you opened your scriptures for the first time in years. And you didn't just read, you *absorbed* those words, devoured them as a hunger-driven soul devours their first real meal. You didn't believe you were starving in a spiritual sense, too, but you were, and thank goodness you began again. You found real sustenance there, and with your soul filled with the things of God, you didn't feel quite so guilty anymore. You found it easier to begin and end each day with a prayer, to love your hobbies and passions, to find joy in the company of your friends. The hand of God was so prevalent in your life that it shocked you. He was really there—and had been the whole time! You just couldn't see His hand before. Now that you could, you couldn't stop saying thank you.

Sunday /ˈsəndā/ service, ***noun***

Church inactivity was a minor side effect from your illness, but as you healed, you realized that it created a major consequence in your life. The importance of the Lord's day had lost all of its meaning to you. It was just another day to spend at home—a break from school and life. Besides, whenever you could muster the strength to attend church, you could hardly stay the whole hour from your stomach hurting (if only more wards offered gluten-free sacrament options!), and the hymns always made you cry.

But when you began to heal, you began to spend Sundays a little differently. You changed the music you listened to, called your parents, listened to those who bore their hearts out at the pulpit. Although you began on rocky footing, especially with consistent attendance, there was one thing that you always believed in: He was there. He loved you.

Not just your Sundays changed, but your whole weeks were spent in preparation for that blessed day. You started spending your free time listening to the words of the Lord wherever you could, although you weren't always consistent (and that was okay). Once you had the energy, you couldn't stop seeing how much the Lord loved all of the people in your life. You told them of His love as often as occasion permitted.

Time /tīm/ infinite, ***noun***

Oh, the curse of mortality! Bound to this Earth in stages, the constant pull of gravity, and the cycles of the Moon. It was strange, though, when you thought about it. How did the worst moments of your life pass by instantly? It was as if someone pulled you out of the body of time for those dark moments, where you could neither look backward nor forward. But now you were free, content in time's flow.

It's been a little over two years now since everything began. The days treat you kinder, and you help new souls in your life

that struggle with what you did. You're still shy, but you're much more open to conversation with the people you surround yourself with. Turns out, they're not as scary as they seem, and they understand your pain, even without knowing all the details. They are very kind, and they help you feel welcome wherever you are, especially on Sundays. It's amazing how many people can relate to the dark waters, not that that's something *great* to relate to, but you know how they felt. They know how you felt. You find solace in the similarities.

When you find some semblance of peace, you will see mortality and the uniqueness of souls on Earth as a strange beauty; the gritty reality of human existence will always make you emotional. What beauty you will find in pondering the nature of the universe! There will be days you struggle, miss your assignments, forget to pray. And, you know what? It will be okay. Because after those days, you will ask for forgiveness. And it will *always* be given to you, unconditionally. That knowledge, that eternal truth, will finally make you smile.

MAURI POLLARD JOHNSON

All Things Both Temporal and Spiritual[1]

The therapist I had been seeing for my eating disorder had me take two pieces of paper and lay them on the ground, the space between them meant to represent my perception of the width of my midsection. After I had laid the paper down, she had me lie between them, on my side, while she moved the two pieces to reflect the objective reality of my torso width. When I stood up and looked at the carpeted void between the two white sheets, I didn't believe it. I was convinced that I had moved them closer in the process of standing up. Or perhaps my therapist had moved them in the brief moment when I wasn't looking. She pulled out the most recent edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and read to me the section on body dysmorphic disorder. I answered yes to each of the criteria she read to me, but I couldn't pull my eyes away from the stark pieces of paper, which seemed to be pulling themselves further and further apart from each other. I was seeing a very different reality than what my therapist was seeing.

[1]"For by the power of my Spirit created I them; yea, all things both spiritual and temporal" (D&C 29.31).

The word *dysmorphia* has roots in ancient Greek, meaning misshapenness or ugliness. I take these words and wear them like a cloak. I absorb them. And although I have realized the extent to which I have embodied them, I wonder how deep they have truly sunk.

For those who deal with it, body dysmorphia is a state of existence. It is like water: you are numb to it when you are surrounded by it. It is the conflation of truth and the utter distrust of what you see or feel in front of you juxtaposed against what others tell you. For example, I fit into a size-two pant from Old Navy while shopping for new clothes as a self-initiation into grad school and yet I take it as a mistake, a fluke, a one-time thing. I am too afraid to take those pants out of my closet, convinced they won't fit. It is a confusion of truth. My therapist tells me I have a disorder—that my dysmorphia literally morphs the way I see myself into something opposite to reality. But that doesn't make it any less painful when I look in the mirror and my reality is my dysmorphia. My husband tells me my body is beautiful, neighbors and family members and even strangers tell me I am "a tiny thing." I live my life with the truth of thin privilege handed to me by the outside world. These are the truths outside of me. And yet, while I do benefit from this objective thinness, my personal truth is the distortion that my body dysmorphia presents to me. Can truth be subjective?

One of the many truths I hold within my religion is that my body and my spirit are stitched together with a divine thread—that "the spirit and the body are the soul of man" (D&C 88.15). Similarly, the scriptures tell us that everything God created is "both spiritual and temporal," and that "*all* things unto [Him] are spiritual" (D&C 29.31, 34; emphasis added). This means that the physical body that God has given me is inherently also spiritual. To me, these truths indicate that if I were to somehow peel my spirit away from my body—separate my soul for a brief moment to examine it under a microscope—they would appear

identical. This theology also would argue that there is an inherent, eternal, celestial connection between my body and my spirit—a sharedness of things, a type of telepathy, a relationship so deep that only death could force them apart.

If my spirit is connected to my body in such an intricate way—connected neuronally, systematically, emotionally, viscerally—does this mean that my body, then, has passed my dysmorphia on like a contagious virus or disease? Has my spirit, by unfortunate birthright, consequently inherited this same disorder?

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The distress that comes from my body dysmorphia often leads me to compulsions: placing my hands on my hips to measure the width of my waist; touching my stomach over and over and over again to see how far it sticks out, to try and push it back in; obsessively trying on tight dresses, skirts, shirts, underwear, anything to verify if they still fit, concretely convinced that they won't; staring at my body in mirrors and windows, turning from side to side, sucking in, pulling and pinching and pushing the parts that fill me with self-loathing. If I do these things just right, I can glimpse for a brief moment the perfection my body has the potential to be, if only I had more willpower.

In the spiritual practice of fasting, we are told that our spirit becomes the master of our body. That forcing our body through physical starvation puts it into submission to our spirit. Giving into hunger means we are weak, means we are carnal, means we are damned. I was told by therapists, dietitians, and doctors that I am no longer allowed to fast. They said that for me, starvation is no longer a spiritual practice. There are many first-Sunday church meetings—when those around me are engaging in our traditional, monthly fast—when I sit in the pews filled with guilt and self-loathing. Thinking that, if only I could

fast, starve, restrict for just a little bit, perhaps I could look a little more perfect, a little more beautiful, a little more obedient, a little more like Christ. Perhaps a twenty-four-hour starvation would be the thing to save me in all spheres.

• • •

Once, while stopped at a red light on our way home from church, I asked my husband if I was a good person, choking through the tears hiding at the back of my throat. His reassuring words fell dead upon my lap.

I repeated the question a few weeks later, the question now becoming a compulsion borne out of my obsession to know if I am okay, if I am good, if I can be saved.

I return to this asking again and again and again. I am never convinced.

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I wonder if my body and spirit, because of their connectedness, share experiences. Does my spirit encounter a similar type of dysmorphia that my body does? Upon reflection, this feels true to me. I had never wondered about the contorted form of my spirit before dysmorphia infected my body. I had always felt comfortable—confident, even—in my spiritual standing and appearance before myself, God, and all those around me. But now I shrink—I hide behind metaphysical baggy sweaters and hate myself for my imperfections.

Growing up, I was praised for being obedient, for being faithful, for following and not asking questions. I went to church every Sunday. I read my scriptures with our family and on my own, sitting under the covers in my bed as my parents would pass by my doorway to look in. I prayed every night and every morning before leaving for school. I prayed about every decision. I never broke the Word of Wisdom, the law of chastity, the

law of keeping the Sabbath day holy. I went on a mission when I received the revelation to go, despite the fact that I was seriously dating the person I wanted to marry and lacked any desire to serve. I accepted without question policies in the Church's history like banning Black members from having the priesthood, polygamy, priesthood leadership positions given only to men, restrictions put upon LGBTQIA+ members and their family members, and so on. I remember learning of the November 2015 policy preventing children of same-sex couples from being baptized and accepting it without flinching, wondering why people struggled with this, believing it made sense, pitying those who could not just "follow the prophet." My spirit appeared flawless, but I was just going through the motions.

• • •

I was praised for this rigid obedience and faith, my staunch rule-following, just as I was with food and dieting and exercise. My religious observance was often as strict as my dieting-turned-eating-disorder: never missing a day of seminary, even though the grade did not affect my GPA; accepting policies that hurt others, never questioning the intent or impact; restraining from crossing any physical boundaries with my boyfriend of over six years, despite the fact that those around me, who seemed just as faithful and obedient as I was, were edging along the boundaries, stepping over lines to see what would happen. I had routines in place: read a page of scripture every night, say a prayer before bed, say a prayer before leaving in the morning, never miss church, wear dresses and skirts on Sundays, always say the most correct answer, the one the teacher was looking for, the one God was looking for, the safest response.

And yet, over the past few years, I have felt my faith maturing, expanding, growing out and up. This feels both freeing and terrifying. I have spent many of the weeks preceding multiple general conference sessions begging God to help me know if

my newfound empathy, compassion, and inner-truths were sinful or wrong—to know if I was apostatizing. My family sees my expansion as separation—from the Church, from the gospel, from God. They view my questions and confusions as disbelief. They see my frustrations as hatred. They see my striving for belonging and inclusion as mutilating the doctrine. From them, and many others who live within orthodoxy, I must hide, shrink, compact my faith so I can fit within their mold of what a righteous person looks like.

• • •

When my body dysmorphia sets in, when my body feels expansive, I cope by shoving my body into compression workout shorts or yoga pants. The tight fabric squeezes my body closer to the shape I think it should be, although never quite enough.

I often shove my faith into a box, keeping it neat and tidy, closer to the shape that the people around me think it should be. When my spirit feels expansive, I see it as misshapen instead of miraculous. I force my beliefs, my emotion, my love to be small enough to stuff into the box, although never quite enough.

• • •

The convergence of my body dysmorphia and spirit dysmorphia results in an explosion of mistrust. *If train A approaches the station at x miles per hour and train B approaches the same station at y miles per hour, how likely is it that the Sabbath day will end in a puddle of tears and self-loathing?*

Instead of the sacrament cleansing my soul, it magnifies the dirt caked to my skin. I have trained myself to sit during the ten minutes of ceremonial passing of the bread and water to recount my mistakes, tally off my sins, and berate myself for weaknesses, for being human, for existing. I was taught that this was to be a time of spiritual masochism: think about all of

the ways you are imperfect—all of the ways you are momentarily damned. I sit, suffocating in pain and shame. As I bow my head and close my eyes, I stare into a metaphysical mirror at my spirit, and a misshapen ugliness is reflected back to me—unworthy, unrighteous, repulsively sinful. I allow my hair to cover my face, to shield the disfigurement of my spiritual self and the tears that I can't stop.

• • •

People—usually those who don't know me well—still tell me they admire my self-control and willpower not to eat certain foods or to go running every day. I alone know the excruciating shame and self-repulsion I feel when I miss a day of running or eat the dessert at a party or the complimentary bread at a restaurant. And people still tell me how they revere my faith and obedience. I accept their compliments, despite the sickening feeling I get when I realize I have questions and waver, and I struggle to accept policies and traditions, and there are days and days and days that I miss my routines and feel condemned forever. These two sides of myself, disfigured and morphed from the reality that others see, are pieces of me I don't know how to release.

• • •

My mind is inscribed with years of feeling ugly, of feeling disformed, of feeling imperfect, of feeling sinful. Just as it is difficult to feel beautiful when my mind distorts the bodily image I see in the mirror, so it is difficult to feel worthy when my mind distorts the spiritual image I see upon internal reflection. And although the sacramental ordinance has caused me grief and pain for the past few years, lately I have been meditating on the symbolism of the bread as body and the water as blood or lifeblood or spirit: both my own body and spirit, and that of Christ.

As I remember the body of Christ, I remember that He embodied all mortal experiences. Meaning that Christ, in the process of His Atonement, housed my dysmorphia within His own body. And, I remember that as I take the sacrament, I—even if only momentarily—embody Christ: perfection, divinity, beauty even in lack of comeliness.

As I drink the blessed water, I embody the spirit of Christ—or perhaps am reminded of the parts of His spirit that already live within me: perfection, divinity, holiness, worthiness. As I focus on seeing Christ within my spirit, I can, for a moment, see myself as whole rather than deformed.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12.10). My dysmorphia, both in body and spirit, are what I frequently (if not constantly) perceive to be my greatest weakness, and it's hard to know how, as The Book of Ether reminds us in the Book of Mormon, this weakness could ever become a strength. And yet, it is in our weaknesses that we are compelled to bring Christ into our being, let Him fill our cracks, let Him come unto us. When we are weak, then we are strong because it is in our weakness that we can let Christ fill us.

Although this does not feel like a cure-all for either my body or spiritual dysmorphia, it does feel like a balm, a brief pain reliever, ibuprofen for my aching soul. This relief only lasts momentarily—returning again after meals or before getting into the shower or when I forget to pray or read scripture or when I struggle to accept certain words of Church leaders. But I try to hold on to these fleeting moments, and glorify God in both my body and my spirit—which I'm reminded are God's. This, to me, means that He is in me and through me and I am of Him, which makes me consider that, even if I can't see it myself, I am filled with some amount of grace and beauty and worthiness, which is, for now, enough.

ADRIENNE POWELL

Dancing to God

I showed up in this body, eight pounds, six ounces, purple and lizard-like, with a head shaped like a princess cap, and with no understanding of what having a body would mean. It was new and clumsy, and it would take time to learn how to move, to smile, to walk, let alone process emotions or engage in complex thought. But my mom says I was an explorer, always ready to go out the door on some new adventure. The photos say I was climbing as soon as I learned to walk: climbing swing sets, door frames, and even mountains. I made my dad give me horsey rides. I rode my tricycle up the steep driveway, trying to pop wheelies. I tumbled and fell and got scraped and covered in bruises. I never sat still.

When I was four I found a ballet book on the floor of the library and I fell in love. Somehow at that tiny age I convinced my parents to let me take dance classes, and when I was not in class I was trying to imitate the moves and positions of the dancers I saw in the pictures. I was dissatisfied with the games we played in those classes; I wanted real technique. I pushed myself on my own, beyond the level of my classes, trying to be a real ballerina. I didn't think about why I danced, I just knew that I had to.

When I was five my dad got sick. He got stomachaches and headaches and fatigue. He stopped being able to eat most foods. My whole family changed how we ate and where we lived. My dad could no longer work, so we moved from North Carolina to West Virginia to live with my grandparents. My dad became grumpier and had a hard time making decisions, and though I was too young to understand, I could tell even then that it was the sickness. He wasn't the dad that I had known before, but the best doctors in the country had no answers and nothing he tried on his own worked. That was the first time I made the connection between the physical, mental, and emotional.

As the years passed after we moved, I switched dance studios a couple of times. I took classes some years and not others, but by the time I started middle school, dance had become one of the strongest forces in my life. But I kept getting sick. By seventh grade I was missing weeks of school and a single cold would set me coughing all winter. I couldn't do ballet four days a week and still keep up with school, so I switched to homeschool. Somehow during those years, I became timid, afraid of the dark, shy around grownups, boys, and strangers, and hesitant to leave my comfort zone. I was a perfectionist, and my biggest fear was of messing up.

During that time dance was everything; next to the gospel and my family, it was the most important thing in the world to me, though I didn't understand why. All I knew was that when I was onstage, I wasn't the shy girl I was in other places. I wasn't worried about how to act or what to say. I could be anything I wanted. I was a storm, a flower, a snowflake, a peasant, a monster, a knight. I was free.

In the back of my head, however, there was a constant nagging that I was being selfish. Dancing required sacrifices, and I couldn't see those sacrifices benefitting anyone but me. Because of my dad's health, which was slowly starting to improve as he

experimented and researched on his own but still limited his ability to work, we were sometimes unable to afford my classes. I tried to work to pay for them myself, but I often felt like I wasn't doing enough. My six younger siblings took most of my mom's attention and energy, and it was difficult for her to take the time to drive me to my classes. I quit and restarted several times throughout middle and high school. I fell behind in an area in which I had once excelled, but I never stopped dancing on my own.

After high school I started attending Brigham Young University, which has a well-acclaimed dance program. Something in my gut had always told me that I wasn't going to be a professional dancer, and that it wouldn't be right for me to major in dance, even if I made it into the very competitive program. But I couldn't quit either, so I looked into minors. I had had a growing urge to learn ballroom, so I decided to try that. I took two of the classes and then left to serve a mission.

It was on my mission that the shyness I had spent years combatting with increasing success came back with a fury I had never experienced before. I developed chronic anxiety, which controlled and paralyzed me when I tried to work. I lost much of my ability to face fear or seek adventure. It was like there was a block in my brain, some physical barrier that made me unable to change my thoughts or feelings. As the months passed, I added hypoglycemia to my list of illnesses, along with overwhelming fatigue and vertigo that no doctors could explain.

I came home sick and broken. For a month, I slept ten hours a night and took long naps during the day. I ran from all social interactions outside of my family. When I couldn't run, I broke down in panic attacks on my bedroom floor.

After two months home I was well enough to go to school for the shorter spring term. I signed up for three classes: Eternal Families, Intro to Dance, and Beginning Social Dance.

I'm sure the religion class was good, but I don't really remember it; it was the dance classes that changed my life.

Social Dance was a challenge at first after contact with men had been off limits for so long, but my body quickly remembered the steps it had once loved. I didn't know it then, but those steps would teach me more about myself and others than I could have imagined.

Intro to Dance was where I met Chelsey McNeil. In her class, we learned about many different dance styles and their history. On Fridays, we actually tried the dances. But we also learned about what dance is, what it means, what it's made of, how it affects our lives. We learned how to combine our bodies, energy, space, and time into art. But more than that we learned to pay attention to those things in our daily lives. One of the assignments we had was to dance for forty-five minutes without stopping and without anyone watching, to create what we could and express what was inside. Another assignment was, for a week, to make all of my movements an exploration of my kinesphere. For that week, I reached out. I didn't try to hide. I was big. And moving my body in that way made me think that way in other areas of my life.

Chelsey was also teaching a Contemporary Dance class that semester and needed more students, so I joined. We learned many principles similar to the ones from the other class. We also did more exercises. We took turns being blindfolded and letting our partners lead us through different movements, sometimes even sprinting across the room. We kept the blindfolds on and learned to move with our breath. We couldn't see anyone watching us. There were no walls, no ceiling, no mirror, no judging spectators. We were free.

That class was canceled after the first week due to a shortage of students, but I couldn't help thinking, *maybe I could live like this. Maybe I can breathe. Maybe I can step, even run, into the dark.*

I tried taking risks instead of always hiding or seeking safety. My semester became a sort of alternation: waking up one day so dizzy I would hang onto my bed for hours to try to keep the world still, the next day daring to cha-cha. One day feeling so sick that I couldn't hold a conversation, taking a chance and asking a boy on a date the next. I started to see how it was all connected: the exhaustion that left me unable to control my anxiety, the constant anxiety that left me completely exhausted. My brain turned to mush when my blood sugar dropped, rendering me unable to speak in coherent sentences or to figure out what to eat. But through all the mush and sluggishness and vertigo, through the crumbling in my mind, there were hints of hope, like sunbeams slipping between the leaves of a dense forest. There were days when I felt better, miracles like getting my energy back just in time to take a test or finish an essay or participate in the ballet section of class, moments of remembering what it felt like to be well, and the ever-present dancing that strengthened my body and encouraged me to step outside of myself just a little more.

As I continued into the realm of ballroom, I knew I would have to start learning Latin dance. At first the idea scared me—my timid ballerina hips didn't like the idea of so much movement or attention. But in Social Dance I had learned a little bit of cha-cha, and it had been fun. That gave me the courage to take a Latin Dance class in the fall, which led to another, and another. I learned rumba and felt beautiful. I learned paso doble and felt powerful. I learned samba and felt confident, like maybe there was something valuable I had to offer to the world. I even felt like I could flirt a little and instead of feeling out of place and selfish, I felt like there was something I was giving people when I interacted with them.

During this time I also started learning other ways to connect my body and my mind. I tried yoga. I went to therapy. I studied the scriptures intently and tried to understand how

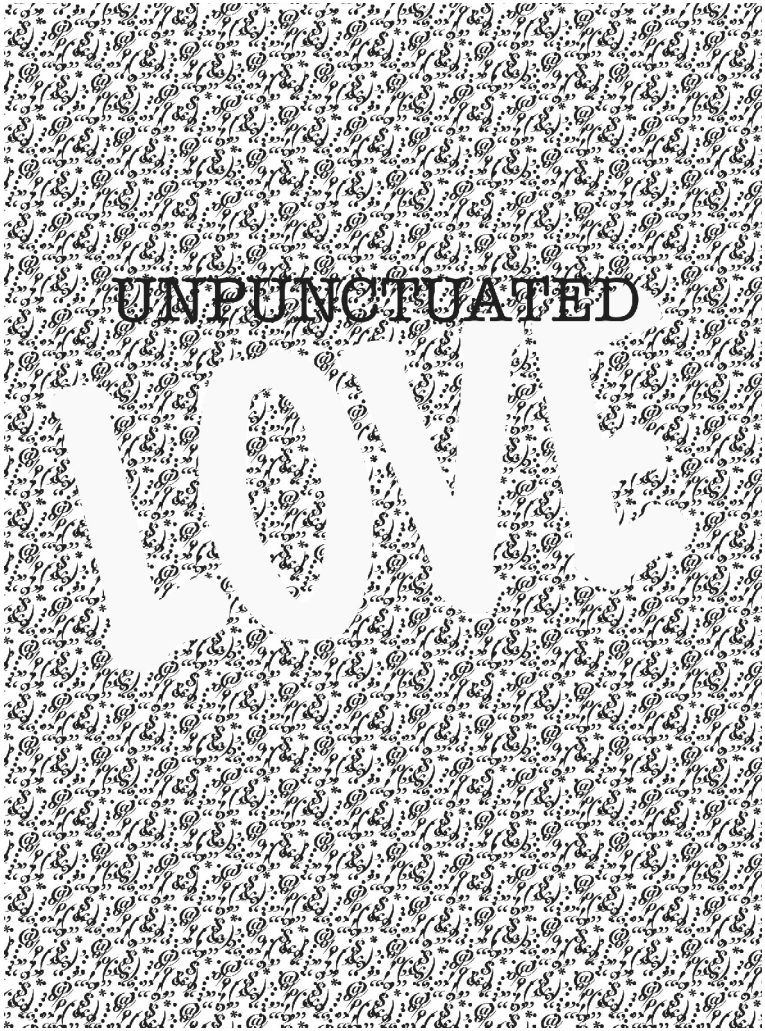
God felt about me. As I learned to love myself, I learned how to feel God's love for me, and as I felt His love for me, I began to feel it for others. I spent time with my dad, whose health had improved over the years so that he could function almost normally. He taught me more about the connection between my body, mind, and spirit: stress and inflammation, cortisol and serotonin cycles, adrenal fatigue, the impact of diet. Gradually I started to notice results, and my anxiety and physical health improved together.

When COVID-19 hit, it became much more difficult to connect with other people. But eventually, through the masks and hand sanitizer and social distancing, we were able to dance again. When I couldn't see people's faces, when their voices were difficult to hear, I learned how to work with them in other ways: the touch of hands, connection of ribs, tension of grip, transfer of weight.

Although COVID took away my ability to make friends in other places, I found them in dance classes. This became especially true as I began doing ballroom competitively. Because many dance events were canceled, I had to be more creative in finding ways to dance, so along with several friends I began registering for competitions. I found a friend whom I had met a year before at a home evening activity and convinced him to compete with me. Our weekly practice sessions became the highlights of my semester as together we learned how to fly.

That was when dancing began to stop feeling selfish. Learning to connect with my body taught me how to connect with others. Taking care of my body, showing it love, made me more grateful for the gift that it is and helped me feel love from and for its Giver. I started to grasp the importance of my body in the plan of salvation: its potential to connect and create, to help, to move, to have power, to learn. I will never dance professionally. I don't know if I'll ever be back on the stage that I love so much. I still don't really understand all the reasons why

I'm driven to dance. But I do know that this gift of a body has given me new ways to love, new ways to create, new ways to build. And someday I will share this gift, create bodies for more of the Father's spirit children, and together we'll catch glimpses of the plan that brought us to Earth and gave us bodies, bodies that will help us become like God.


UNPUNCTUATED

JAMIE LEWIS HOLT

Unpunctuated Love

Unconditional love is not something I think mortals have the capacity for. Don't get me wrong, we strive for it, we hope some big guy upstairs has it . . . but to say *I love someone unconditionally* would be false in my eyes. Not fair for them. There are always conditions. Always actions, lists, parameters when love is given or withheld. Mortals can't love unconditionally. And since I am mortal and also an English major, two conditions I grapple with daily, I started to see punctuation as the same thing.

Conditional.

There is no such thing as unconditional punctuation. Periods signal an end, commas make lists, parentheses keep secrets, exclamation points use loud voices, and semicolons just want to have groupies tagging along even if they don't make much sense . . . but what would unpunctuated love look like? What would love without punctuation be capable of? Without ends or lists or secrets kept? So I wrote the following essay about:

unpunctuated love

I think it was my need to snuggle a baby
that brought about the phrase two minute cuddles
when I would call my fifth and last child
and I knew it would be my last child
my only boy
to my lap just as he had learned to walk
and tell him it was time for two minute cuddles
and the first year of this daily routine
he struggled to still his body
and last the two minutes as I curled him in my lap
and stroked his hair
and quietly talk to him
while he watched the timer count down on my phone
while I ran his blond ringlets around my fingers
and talk about his day of chasing after sisters
and what he wanted for a snack
and if the puppy was being nice to him
and if he slept well and did he want to wear his jammas all day
or did he want to change because it was a choice he could make
and when Daddy got home on Friday what should we do
and the timer would go off
and he would carefully hand my phone back
and say
thank you for the cuddles Mommy
and patter away to a new adventure
after his imprisonment in my love
I did not know I was creating a need in my son
to come sit on my lap everyday
and chatter about life
and replay his highs and lows
and I do not remember when the timer on the phone was forgotten
and time would stretch into a whole movie
as he lay by my side
under my arm

stroking my hand
as he jabbers about life
and things he has read and thought about
and his lesson for family home evening
and I do not get to choose when it is time for him
to come find me anymore
and sit on my lap at my desk
as my legs go numb from his body that now outweighs my own
and he is pudgy and twelve
and starting to stink in ways
I never wanted to enjoy but miss as he laughs
and goes to take his shower for the day
and cackle about Mom gagging at his stench
and the blood rushes back into my limbs and heart
and I do not want to forget his smell and smile and silliness
as he plops down after school for
my two minute cuddles
To trace this habit to its origin probably started when I spent
quiet time with my mom when I was a kid
and crawled up on her bed
when she would wake up from her bedtime
while we were at school
and I would let her run her fingers through my hair
and I would chat about my loathing of middle school and not
having any friends
and what she needed me to do
so she could stay in bed
two more minutes because
I would go iron her nursing uniform that was white and crisp
and she had just sewn new buttons on
with a baby theme
and I would run my hands over her belly that bobbed and tumbled
as my next sibling stirred to life
and pressed on her bladder and made lying in bed

another two minutes impossible
And then the day *after* Christmas
my dad and I
rushed my mom to the hospital
and within minutes
the tenth baby was born
and something was not right
and before I ever saw her
she was rushed to NICU in St George
and then flown to Primary Childrens in Salt Lake
and Mom was left without a baby to snuggle
and milk that came in
and was thrown away
and my father complained about the four hour trip
to go pick up the baby
that would die anyway
So I did not mind being the one
to stay up at night
and feed the baby
and change her diaper
and miss sleep a girl in seventh grade needed
so my mom could go to work
and my dad could sleep
and perhaps ignore his daughter that was not quite right
and really I think
he just did not want to get attached
to a child that was not
supposed to live more than a day
and she lived many months
and I never complained about rocking her to sleep
or getting up with her
and sometimes my littler sister
who was just two years younger than me
and has a heart the size of Africa

would want to cuddle with her new sibling
and I would tell her just for a few minutes because
we had a schedule to keep
and I would wrap baby number ten in a blanket
and give her the chance to get to know her new sister
until one night Dad and Mom went grocery shopping
and I did our little schedule
and I put her to bed as I had for nine months
and I called my friend Natalie to chat for a minute
and I dismissed the feeling to check on my sister
and I dismissed the feeling again to check on my sister
and a third time the words *hang up the phone* pierced my heart
and I stood to check on my sister at the end of the bed
in her yellow rolling crib
and I had missed the chance to ever give her
two more minutes of cuddles
And I lived my life from eighth grade on in stages
of grief dealing with my missed opportunity to love a loved one
so twenty years later
when my father was raging about the cost of a funeral
and my mother was in bed on the last day of her life
knowing that the oxygen was not doing anything but keeping
the cancer alive
and the hospice nurse had left
and two of my brothers were diligently standing watch to keep
my father from accidentally entering the room
in his angry and contentious state
I had to take her pulse from her wrist
and then her elbow
and then her neck
as her heartbeat faded
and her breaths came once or twice a minute
and the room distilled into some other place that I could not see
but felt a crowded presence

and I looked at my brothers and knew without speaking
it would take more than two minutes
to process the passing of our mother and
there would be no words to describe it to my father
who stormed down the hallway ten minutes later
irate we had not called him into the room when
he had not been in there all morning
and I hugged my brothers and told them I was leaving
and when they want to talk about those few minutes I do too
and when my father wants to talk about those few minutes
I am at a loss for words to describe something that has to be felt
not heard by repetition or examination
but by subjecting oneself
to the miserable contracts of life and love
in order to understand why just two minutes
can feel like an eternity sometimes
and I do not know as I look back at the last seven years since
my mother passed and the years
of rarely talking to my father
if wish I had spent a mere two minutes explaining to him
why I cannot explain the passing of my mother in words he will
ever feel
and looking forward two minutes I think I will call him and see
how the Jazz did during their last game
and tell him about my puppy who loves me unconditionally
and would love to meet Grandpa
and then
maybe
someday
he will understand what unpunctuated love feels like
but probably not from me
because I still cannot put it
into words
that someone can feel

HOLDEN D'EVEGNEE

The Fleshy Tables of the Heart

> He thought each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins. So be sparing. What you alter in the remembering has yet a reality, known or not. (McCarthy 111)

I know the story is perfectly executed when it causes their mouths to plummet towards the ground, their eyes ablaze with bewildered bemusement and just a dash of disgust.

"The fish heads were rather unappetizing, but I'd have to say that lung was worse. Eating lung is like eating a racquetball, but a fish head watches you as you eat it. But that was our daily missionary menu in the Ivory Coast. So, as you can imagine, when my trainer suggested buying a live goat, I was ecstatic." I pause and wait for their reaction—relishing the sharp gagging noise or the precipitous rise of an eyebrow.

"A *live* goat?" They always ask.

"Yes, alive and breathing. Of course." I always laugh along with my audience as I weave my tale, the list of dramatic details expanding with each retelling. "Our goat supplier, who coincidentally was our branch president, came rolling down

the road with his butcher friend. A hog-tied goat hung from the motorcycle they were riding. They threw the goat at our feet in the backyard then left to find a pair of machetes."

Our backyard turned de facto butchery, sheepishly presents itself to the crowd's imagination. "So, I ask my trainer, Elder Kipulu, about it, and he just looks at me quizzically and asks, 'Where else would we kill it?'"

My rapt audience smiles and shakes their heads in disbelief as I chuckle at my former naiveté, although the laugh is mostly employed to distract me from the gnawing sensation of guilt in my stomach.

Do I describe how I stared at the bleating animal as he writhed within the ropes that bound him? Do I mention how much a goat screams like a drunken man? Do I describe the terror in its eyes as he and I both understood where he would be by the end of the hour?

I don't. I just finish the story as if it's a joke building to a punchline. Marinating in their shock, I ride the rising action.

"Then I noticed that one of the sacrifice's hooves was loose. With the grace of a ballerina and the speed of an escaped convict, the goat vaulted upright and began to back away. Our branch mission leader, Brother Deschou, leapt to confront the hairy Houdini. They stared each other down while my companion and I watched with bated breath. Suddenly, the goat lurched forward and broke Deschou's ankles better than any All-Star. The goat's two tied back hooves lamely followed his pumping front legs as he rounded our apartment and flew down the rusty mud-encrusted road. Here was our month's meat supply loping down the way at incredible speeds while I just watched the whole thing unravel like some late-night sitcom. Brother Deschou's identical twin brother suddenly joined the fray along with a wandering band of children. Finally, our brave hunters carried the freshly bound goat back on their shoulders as the children hollered and sang circles around their prize."

Laughter, grins, and disbelief fill the stupefied atmosphere of my performance. I love seeing how simultaneously confused and thrilled they are. Guilty vindication oozes over me as I hungrily take in their shocked expressions.

In the telling and retelling of this story, I wasn't lying, but I knew that my delighted audience didn't have the slightest idea what I was actually talking about. They didn't know how the Deschou brothers were quick to laugh or how awkward and out of place the branch president looked with the buttons of his white shirt straining desperately to guard the dignity of their bearer. Neither the people nor the area of Afféry filled my audience with a sunbaked wistfulness or a visceral horror; the story meant nothing to them beyond a funny anecdote. With each retelling, I can't help but wonder when each new, extraneous detail wiggled its way in. Those details always surprise me as much as my audience. I didn't tell them the way the animal's gaze matched mine, made me think of the old temple priests and their daily sacrifices and butcheries.

After restraining the captive (securely this time), the butcher arrived with freshly sharpened machetes. Everyone started building a fire and I slunk inside, where I could scrub my laundry in a bucket with my scabbed hands. My heart raced as I waited for the sound I knew I would recognize even though I had never heard it before. Guttural, wet death throes wafted through door of our living room, the kitchen, and then to me. The only other sight I had of the affair was when our branch president came into our kitchen to wash the reverently coiled entrails in our kitchen sink and redeem the head on which he had called dibs in exchange for his services. When the time came, the members of our branch gathered around Elder Kipulu's famous Congolese fufu and sauce. Eagerly, I took a handful but as I reached for sauce, I spied a kidney-like organ floating nonchalantly in the middle of the bowl like a pool noodle. I thought longingly of the lung meat.

Sometimes I showed my audience a picture of the sauce and its floating organs.

"Could you show us a picture of the goat?" they would often ask.

I would frown and explain, "Well, I thought it would be better if I remembered it just as meat. I didn't want to look into its eyes, you know?"

But they couldn't know.

Notwithstanding, my lack of a photo is still one of the regrets I harbor about my story. There is no frame of reference when I remember what the goat looked like. It has become increasingly generic every time I've thought about that day until now I just have a fuzzed, horned idol as a placeholder. My mother included a stock photo of a goat when she forwarded my email. When I saw the photo, I immediately noticed that the goat was too elongated. Its fur was too light, and the photo was of the profile of the goat where its eyes can't burn into yours.

To make matters worse, I've gotten so used to the ebb and flow of the art of my story I tell others that it has supplanted my memory of the event. It is only with concentrated effort that I remember that there were two other missionaries with us and that a goat's screams are harrowing the first time you hear them. It becomes harder and harder to be true to the animal whose blood is on my hands. In telling this story and myriad others, I've realized that remembering something can erode the integrity of its memory. It is like the torrential rains that burst from the clouds and tore at the jungle mud creating jagged chasms. The water had no choice but to follow the scars. Remembering is gingerly stroking those familiar grooves until your strokes melt into the curves and hollows.

This erosion of memory is why I rely heavily on my documentation of my African adventure. During my mission, I was as prolific as I was obsessive with my journal, emails, and accumulation of mementos. At the end of every day, my journal

provided a canvas on which I could express the anxiety and joy that permeated everything. When I reduced my experience and cast it into a narrative mold, it provided something I could probe and understand. It provided a witness, an echo to confirm to me that my mission in its entirety would be worthy as an offering.

Witnessing the people and their stories became what sanctified my experience. Before serving a mission, I had thought that a mission was a two-year ascetic quest for holiness—a sanctity reeking of antiseptic. I could just be a sponge soaking in the whitewash. A hospital room and a temple shared a familial bond of Germ-X, constancy, and an abhorrence of dirt; a mission was nothing if not an immutable constant of miracles dripping in an IV. I was quickly, and quite rudely, evicted from this misconception. The daily exposure to raw, visceral emotions provoked by talks of salvation and deity showed me the superfluity of a pristine altar. My Levitical luncheon with the Deschou twins opened my eyes to the blood-drenched reality of sacramental slaughter.

As a missionary, I wasn't divorced from reality; I was in constant communion with it. I came to realize that holiness is not a removal from reality, but the act of embracing it, blood and all. The trick was immersing oneself without training your tongue to taste only bitterness. As any Ivoirian would be quick to say after tasting my cooking, you can never remove salt once you add too much. I thought if I could just become a witness to both the gospel and the beauty of the Ivoirian people, then I could straddle this guilt and passion that had permeated the everyday experience of being a missionary.

My desire to embrace the Ivoirian reality became almost feverish as time went on. I studied the various local dialects, asked about the different ethnic groups and their traditions, and I ate enough habanero peppers to wreak havoc on my digestive system and on any Ivoirian's confidence that I couldn't handle one more. It was by pouring myself into the country

that I had thought that I could transcend the haunting that seemed to lurk behind every laugh, every hurried glance, and every tear of a people who had witnessed two civil wars in less than a generation. I came as a witness for the gospel and left as a missionary for Ivoirian vivacity and their *joie de vivre*.

Before the incident with the goat in Afféry, I was with Elder Kipulu and some other missionaries as we prepared for a baptism the following day. Elder Mvita was doing interviews in the branch building; my trainer and I were cleaning the outdoor font, removing insects and mud. Like always, a pack of small boys had breached the door and were romping around the building while we worked. Many of the boys attended Primary on Sundays though I couldn't tell you who their parents were. Elder Kipulu asked the boys if they had been baptized and was met with disinterested, quick shakes of the head. After some further questioning, it became apparent that most were younger than the "the age of accountability." One boy proudly boasted of his nine years of earthly existence. Kipulu smiled.

"Would you like to be baptized?"

Excitedly the oldest boy said yes as his comrades leered at him jealously.

"Elder Mvita!" Kipulu called, "Could you do one more interview really quick?"

I was horrified and protested accordingly. In the Missionary Training Center, they drilled into us the importance of assuring that every baptismal candidate took all the lessons and understood the gravity of the covenants they would be making. Despite my arguments, my trainer and Elder Mvita reasoned that this boy had heard plenty of Primary lessons and would understand enough as he continued to attend. I was in training and could speak as much French as Pepé le Pew, so the boy was baptized the next day. In our eighteen weeks together, Elder Kipulu and I only really fought about this issue. I was furious and refused to count the baptism in our report to the zone.

In *Preach My Gospel* I created a special spot where I wrote down the names of every person that I had helped get baptized, and in my journal, I wrote down things about them that I had admired in order to remember them better. Like the book of Numbers, I recorded the names of those people that I learned to love like family in order to commemorate their Day of Atonement and rebirth. I referenced this page so much in my remembering that it ripped from the binding. This is my altar and judgment bar. I think of each face and each ceremony as I trace the ink . . . the name . . . the date. I pause between Marie-Laure and Lucien. There is no space in the list, but I know that there is a gap that yawns as wide as eternity. My sense of injustice led me to purposefully leave out the little boy's name on that page. To this day I don't know his name and can't recall his face. I was so outraged by the injustice of premature baptism that I had explicitly done what I had accused my peers of doing. I baptized this boy in the river Lethe and left him to oblivion. If I couldn't tell his story, what could serve as a sin offering on that altar? What could I place in his stead?

My accumulation of stories and regret was eventually interrupted by a mysterious disease that raged across Europe. COVID-19 came and caused a panic resulting in my evacuation home three weeks before the official end of my service. Like a thief in the night, we, the American elders, vanished and abandoned everyone we knew for an unknown fate with an unknown plague.

I told myself that the guilt that haunted me for the weeks following my return was caused by the sudden evacuation and lack of closure. I knew that wasn't completely true; it was artistic license. Despite purposefully omitting them from my journal, I couldn't forget the dreams that began to circle me as I prepared to come home. There was one reoccurring dream in particular where I found myself home celebrating my return with tearful friends and family. Inevitably I would realize that it

wasn't real and that my body was waiting patiently in Africa for my return. My dream-self would sob hysterically while grabbing the nearest table, begging them not to send me back to the mission field. Shame welcomed me back to consciousness and my African apartment. When the airports began to close and we were told false information that the American border had been shut, I gulped down air to push away the horror.

Despite my anguished confusion, once I was home, I couldn't stop talking about my experience. The undigested memories gushed out of my mouth at any unfortunate passerby. Those caught in the splash zone were excited for the occasional show, but interest was ignorant. There was no yearning for an Ivoirian's hazy laugh. I couldn't describe the horrible sweetness of an Ivoirian mama who gives you more food than she has for herself or her children. Could a misunderstood offering still be accepted if only you could see it? My stories were lovingly and hungrily crafted into delicately painted synopses and folktales, but they were just caricatures. In this telling, the marionette of Elder Beya was too cruelly apathetic or that picture of the sunset didn't capture the smell of the burning garbage hidden out of frame. I danced these grotesque puppets in front of an audience to give them some semblance of the beauty and terror that had consumed me. The worst part is that now when I try to remember the whole of my experience, the puppet shows come to mind, not the memory itself. It is with effort that I remember the details that made the experience alive. More often than not, the only faces I remember are those I stole with my camera and the stories are shadows from the emails I sent. It is a phony kind of devotion, but a kind of devotion still.

This sacrament of remembrance was how I worshipped the beauty and meaning of the reality of what I faced. Though an imperfect offering, it was something to place on the altar. I spent many nights after I came home in a memorial penance.

I thought of the faces, the sights, the smells, the feelings, and the thoughts that had constituted my life for two years. This was a fight against the decay of time or the overgrowth of performance. Before I went to sleep, I took each village, each companion, each missionary, and each investigator, working methodically my way down rosary beads of memory. I tenderly caressed each bead and tried to conjure their faces and the ways they smiled, how they talked, what made them laugh and cry, and how they lived. The knobs and coarseness of each bead began to wear away because of the frequency of use. In fear, I would hide the prayers and continue my life in order to keep the memory uncorrupted, but that only made the colors fade and the wood crack. Each prayer somehow reminded me of the ones I couldn't remember or the ones I had lost.

Now, every Sunday, I find myself before an altar where a voice repeats a vow that is so well-worn that the droning, laborious tone and rehearsed inflections have become as sacred as the words. A holy drama that never ends. Here we promise to remember an event we never witnessed. Communion is the joint remembering of events that we all believe happened but that we haven't experienced. I wonder, was Peter ever angry when he broke bread with people who recounted their experience with a man that they never ferociously loved and feared? When Peter found himself fishing on the same lake where he had trod on currents, did he feel remorse for all the stories and the people he couldn't remember? Did he feel guilty for just fishing again? How could he not weep bitterly when asked if he loved his Master? Did Peter ask Mark to write the gospel because the ink reminded him too much of running blood? Is remembering the sheep nourishment enough?

I don't know what Peter felt or how he remembered. For me, I have to fill in the details of the story with my own. Maybe the wooden cross was silver like the great Fromager trees, and the mysterious Aramaic last words sounded like

Baoulé to the Roman legionnaires. Either way, I still promise to echo and honor a memory that isn't mine. I spent two years teaching a story that I never lived. I keep coming back to the stone-hewn altar where I've placed those two years and the memories they created. The story breathes through me in quick, panicked breaths. The expiation I seek starts with knowing that the story I offer must converge with scripture. The lapping of the Galilee sounds like the caressing waves of the Ébrié Lagoon. The boat Peter leaped from is a polished, graceful pirogue. The ram that saved Isaac's life is actually a goat. A goat with a black coat, the balance of an acrobat, and vacuous, burning brown eyes that never look away.

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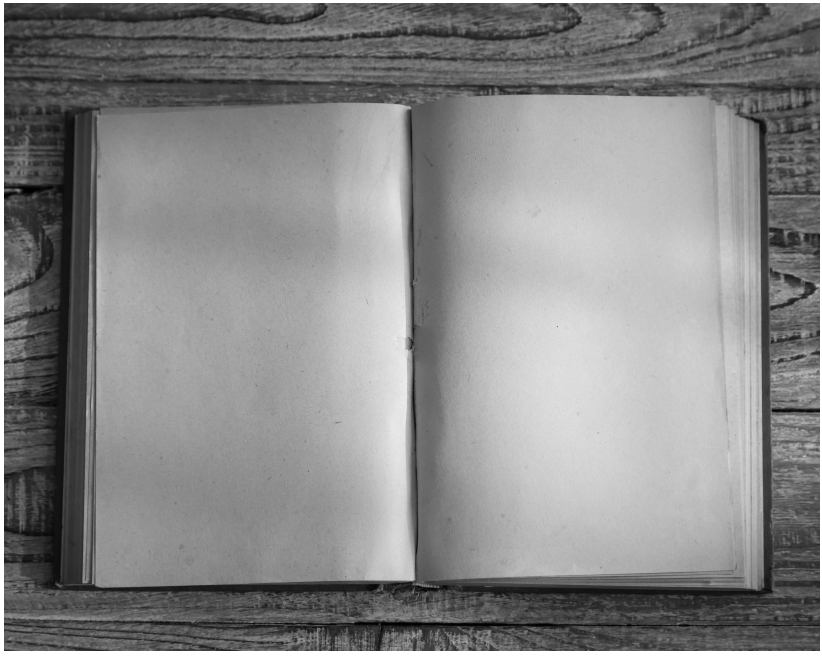

JACOB LILJENQUIST

Blank Space

It's late. Later than I have ever been up before. Around me my siblings drift silently in the currents of sleep. Their deep breaths are crashing waves against the shore of my consciousness, washing away my resolve. I feel at times like I should join them.

But I can't—not yet.

A dull light shines from my small reading lamp, illuminating the pages of *The Lightning Thief*. When my cousin recommended it to me over the summer, on a similarly sleepless night, I had been skeptical. He talked about it with an energy and enthusiasm that was illogical. I didn't understand at the time—after all, how could anyone get excited about ink on paper?

My hands continue to trace the sentences, pointing my mind toward their meaning as a rebellion against the growing urge to sink into the soft feather down of my pillow. In this moment, I finally understand. In brief flashes, I *feel* as if I am there among the characters. Their tears are mine. Their triumphs are mine. Their *world* is mine. I feel as though I am in it—like if I were to close my eyes, I would wake up right there with them all.

I turn the page and come face to face with a blank piece of paper.

I sit in silence, breath catching and fingers tightening around the edges of the book. It takes me a moment to comprehend what has just happened. In a frenzy I turn back a page, skimming to make sure I didn't miss anything—only to find that I read right the first time. The book is finished.

I reverently fold the small paperback closed and fumble for the alarm clock I keep at the side of my bed. It's nearly 1:00 a.m., but after extinguishing the reading light and settling back into my pillow, I still can't sleep. The reader inside of me obsesses over the book, furious that it has been deprived of the rest of Percy's story. It flits about, trying to weave an epilogue out of plot threads. Trying to create certainty out of ambiguity.

What happens that night proves to be definitive—a transformative experience that shapes the rest of my existence. I take my first steps into a new life, a newly awakened Adam in a literary Eden, finding true joy in the world of the written word.

But in the midst of my ecstasy lurks a specter. That night, I have my first encounter with the Blank Space.

That night, I begin to fear it.

• • •

I encounter the Blank Space intermittently for the next three years. Slowly, I learn its secrets. It likes to hide at the end of chapters, and especially at the end of books. On occasion it lurks in the emptiness of lined paper. I am shocked to discover it the first time I open a Word document to write an essay.

I learn to fight it as well. I discover that sequels will drive it out of a book. I fill my notebooks with doodles, or pages of notes I will never review, just to destroy its home. I make sure that I fill each essay with enough details to cover every base—best to be careful, after all.

• • •

We haven't been up here long. An hour, maybe two. My family is gathered in the living room of my Papa John's apartment, where Grandma's hospital bed is surrounded by aunts and uncles. She's alive, but the grayness of the sky seems to pass through the walls and seep into her. Her breaths are shallow and quiet, almost covered by my father's quiet sobs.

My cousin Andy is crying when I find him, sitting on the patio's swinging bench. Andy, loves horses and cowboys and biting his cousins while playing Cops and Robbers. Seeing him like this feels like a betrayal.

"Hey, Andy," I whisper, awkwardly putting my arm around his shoulder. "It's gonna be okay. I know it's gonna be okay."

Andy sniffles and looks up at me. "I know, I know. I'm just gonna miss her y'know?" He takes a second to wipe the back of his hand against his nose before continuing. "And what about Dean, and Luke? And even Kate? They'll grow up without her. What if they never get the chance to know her?"

Never get the chance.

An uncertainty I've never considered before washes over me. I had been raised in the gospel. I'd been taught the plan of salvation. I had been to funerals, and heard family members assure each other that the deceased was in a better place. I had grown up singing proudly that families can be together forever.

I have my faith, my religion. I believe, but on that cold Idaho patio—I don't *know*. And my uncertainty invites a traitorous new possibility into my head.

What if I am wrong?

I do my best to assure Andy. I dutifully parrot the words of the adults, assuring him that we'll see Grandma again. I tell him that families can be together forever, that his brothers and sisters will get to meet her someday. But in my heart, I don't know.

I look up into the lifeless sky. The Blank Space stares back at me, free from the paper that I had thought was its prison.

• • •

The years rush along, and each day I find myself losing a war.

That day on the patio makes it painfully clear to me that I did not know my enemy. The Blank Space is not a monster of the written word, a beast that hunts amongst dry ink and empty paper. It is a creature of endings. It makes its home in every uncertain goodbye, every abrupt conclusion, every incomplete story. Everywhere I go, I begin to see its terrible, mocking face.

Every day I wage a battle with the Blank Space. Many days, I lose.

In seventh grade, my best friend moves away unexpectedly. I am sitting in the cafeteria when I find out, and the color drains from the room in an instant as the Blank Space whispers to me tauntingly. *What if he's moved away for good? Will you ever make any more friends? What does it matter, when they'll leave you too?*

In tenth grade, I come across the girl I love sitting next to my best friend, her hand in his. What hurts more than the heartbreak is the not knowing; for months I obsess over what I think is my incomplete story with her. Here, too, the Blank Space mocks, granting me false hope. *Who knows? Maybe someday, she'll love you back.*

In the twelfth grade, I apply for college—to press on toward the future. A whole new world of possibilities opens to me, and I am *terrified*—because everywhere I look, I see the Blank Space. *I win again, Jacob. The future is mine.*

• • •

I ponder the stone patchwork that makes up the front wall of the chapel. The future looms before me, and the only thing I can see clearly is a mission, and maybe college. Everything else is empty, and blank. For a second, I wish I could be like a brick in the wall—surrounded by certainty. Secure in its place.

"I don't know what I'm doing with my life, Dad," I whisper quietly. "I'm seventeen years old, and I don't have *any* direction. I have *no* idea what I'm gonna do when I grow up."

My dad pauses a moment, and chuckles. He leans down to me and whispers. "Buddy, most people don't. Heck, *I* don't know what I'm going to be doing a year from now. It's just part of life."

Dad sits back up and pats me on the back. "Just—don't go living your life in one day, son."

Dad's advice helps a little. For a time, I win a few battles against the Blank Space. In time, our conflict turns cold, becoming a standoff instead of war.

In time, I receive my mission call. I graduate. I spend the summer preparing, hot days filled with endless scripture reading, family time, and soul-rending goodbyes. I worry that each friend I leave I will never see again. Until the day arrives that I enter the MTC. Two weeks later, I leave behind the world I know for the golden, sunburnt land of Australia.

I immerse myself in the work. I forget about home. I put my friends out of my mind. Despite this all, my worries about the future don't disappear, nor does the Blank Space retreat. It is right there, laboring against me at each door. *You should have tried harder. Who knows what might have happened?*

• • •

It's 11:00 p.m. on the first day of the transfer. To my right, Elder Puckey sleeps peacefully, his Olympiad snores dutifully trying to drown out my thoughts. I appreciate their efforts, but they do little to stem the tide of worries that flood my brain.

It's my first day in this new area, and my first day in a leadership position. The call to serve in Loganholme had come just as I had been adjusting to my previous area. We'd been about to have our first baptism of the year in the ward—and then I had been ripped away.

I sit in bed, listening to Puckey's snores as they mingle with the air conditioning unit in our room. The Blank Space surrounds me, oddly silent. It seems to be waiting for something. Even though it does not actively taunt me, I feel its pressure, its crushing weight.

I climb out of bed as quietly as possible, and kneel down beside my mattress. "Dear God," I whisper shakily. "Please. I need your help."

For a few minutes I pray. It's not a long prayer, and it is not thorough. But I lay at my God's feet each of my worries. I plead for certainty in my new calling, for a clear path, and for direction in how best to serve the people I have been called to serve.

What happens next, I can't fully explain. One minute I'm praying, the next I have my phone in my hands and I am writing a note. The revelation flows from me with a steadiness that belies its ambiguity:

> *I have no idea what I'm doing. So, for now, all I can do is love the zone and the people as much as possible. I need to forget myself and help others as much as possible, because focusing on what I* can't *do is selfish and gets me nowhere.*
>
> *I'm going to do nothing but love and serve these people and missionaries—even if it wears me to the bone. I know this is what God would have me do.*

It is an answer to my prayer, and I know that the words did not come from me. I prayed for direction, for clear guidance—and I received it. It was not a list of scriptures to share with the missionaries, or of initiatives I needed to implement. It was not a collection of house numbers that needed knocking, or a

part-member family we needed to focus on. It was a statement, open-ended—yet clear. Broad—yet applicable.

Ambiguous—yet beautiful.

As I get up from my knees and climb into bed, I can't help but smile. The Blank Space has not disappeared.

For the first time in my life, I am glad it hasn't.

• • •

I hold the revelation I receive that night as my personal motto for the rest of the mission. The two transfers I spend in Loganholme are heaven as I apply it, and in every area afterwards I find joy in trying to live by what God taught me that night.

I return home. I begin to struggle with the Blank Space, but it feels—different. What once felt like a war, and then a stand-off, begins to feel like a disagreement between acquaintances. I can't help but wonder what changed.

• • •

"All right everyone, pencils down."

Sister Price stands at the front of the room, expectant. It's the first assignment of the year, and she's asked us to write a short statement about something we believe in. We've spent the last few minutes compiling a list of ten personal beliefs.

As she continues to outline the assignment, I stare at the empty place where my tenth belief should have gone. That same Blank Space that has haunted me since childhood stares back. No longer accusatory or speculative—but thoughtful. I sit back in the cramped classroom desk and take a moment to reflect.

I consider the first time I wrote a short story after the mission. When I sat down to write, the empty paper seemed inviting instead of cold. Full of potential, and life.

I consider the friendships that I formed with my freshman-year roommates. I find that I do not worry about leaving them. Instead, I cherish the memories we share—and wait eagerly to create more in the future.

I consider how I responded differently recently at my grandpa's funeral than I did at Grandma's. I realize that I didn't agonize over the possibility that I wouldn't see him again. Instead, I found hope in the possibility that I would.

My pen hovers over the blank tenth line—and the Blank Space beams at me. I place my pen and circle the emptiness at the bottom of my list, and just below it I write my tenth belief:

"I believe in blank space."

ALISON LINNELL

On Love Languages

It's been thirty years since the debut of Gary Chapman's best-selling book on love languages, in which he describes five "love languages": gifts, acts of service, quality time, words of affirmation, and physical touch. Not surprisingly, food isn't on his list.

But food might be my love language. Not necessarily for how I best receive love, but definitely how I give it. I can't decide if that is a good thing, a bad thing, or something that just is, but lately I have felt compelled to figure that out. I believe food is my love language because even though I rarely eat meat I am eager to make honey-lime chicken enchiladas or sweet pork burritos for my children if it is their requested birthday meal. I believe food is my love language because on Thanksgiving I will make any requested pie—a chocolate cream (for my grandson), pecan (for my son-in-law), lemon sour cream (for my daughter), and several pumpkin pies (for my husband and son)—definitely more pie than we can eat. And if I forget the salt in the crust (which I have done more than once), I will consider remaking the pies so my family is not disappointed.

• • •

My oldest son, at thirty-something, told me he struggles to feel love from me. When he said this, he was trying to figure out a painful divorce and life in general not going as he had hoped, but still I knew he felt more than just disappointed in life; I knew there was a disconnect between how I tried to show love to him and what he experienced. I recall listing in my mind all the things I had done to show him love, but I imagined he was listing all the times we had disagreed—disagreed about piano lessons, school, homework, house rules, or God, especially about God and God's words and God's rules.

When he asked for specific examples of how I showed him love, among the things I told him was how for several months when he was out of work, I baked cookies—ginger or lemon or brookies or snickerdoodle or pumpkin chocolate chip or white chocolate macadamia nut—each Sunday and stopped by his house with them and chatted on his doorstep. He asked me if I did that for him or for myself. I believed the cookies and visit had shown him someone was aware of him, hoping for better things for him, and that he was loved. I didn't understand how he couldn't see that. He lived alone, and COVID-19 increased the isolation associated with that. I needed a reason to check on him, to physically see him, to know he was surviving. But I wonder now if those visits would have meant more to him if I had come without the cookies.

During that conversation with my son, I was in the midst of figuring out if God loved me, and if He was aware of me. My life felt disappointing too. It wasn't the first time I felt unnoticed and overlooked by God and knew it wouldn't be the last. I had been trying to question His love less and trust Him more when I pleaded for relief when I felt engulfed by my husband's anxiety or uprooted by another child's health or emotional issue or dismayed by another financial setback that came with

the ups and downs of owning a business. But trust and love feel difficult to embrace when I am disillusioned with God and His promises. For many years, I pursued the words in Deuteronomy to "love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (Deut. 6.5), and I sought to follow the command there to "teach [the commandments] diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way" (Deut. 6.7). Yet, it was the talking of God, the sitting together reading scriptures, the attempts to walk in His way that frequently created a wedge between me and my son, especially during his teenage years. And now, it seems while I was trying to love God and obey God and show my son how to love Him and obey Him that my son didn't feel loved, and I don't know how to reconcile that with God or my son.

• • •

I can't decide when food became a love language for me. I know my mother and father tried to get me to cook, and I resisted; I was content with a bowl of cereal if no one else fixed dinner. Maybe this love language began when my children were in elementary school, with breakfast. I don't recall when I started cooking each morning, but I remember my children being disappointed when I didn't. With that, pancakes, waffles, scrambled eggs, German pancakes, French toast, and coffee cake became part of our morning routine. Not all our days began with my children sitting on a kitchen stool with their elbows resting on the counter, faces cupped in the palms of their hands, anticipating the pancakes to be flipped on the hot griddle, talking about school or friends or the Lego creation they had made, but I wanted them to. Some days, we experienced the chaos of finishing book reports or looking for shoes or finding a library book that needed to be returned while the oatmeal cooked too long and stuck to the bottom of the pan.

When school was in, I packed lunches during the morning too. I might have begun this tradition with the reliable PB & J, an apple, and a bag of chips. But after packing something fancy one day like a seven-layer Mexican dip with tortilla chips, my children not only raved about it, but said their friends wished for a lunch like that too. And thus, lunches of pasta salad and a breadstick, or crackers, cheese, and pepperoni slices with fruit became the norm. The food not only became a way for me to show love before school and during school when they were away from me, but a way for me to feel appreciated when so much of motherhood—unloading the dishwasher, folding laundry, carpooling to school and to piano lessons and to Cub Scouts—is not. When I set a plate of cookies in front of my children while they were doing homework and they said, "Mom, these cookies are sooo good!" I imagined the sentiment being something more like: "Mom, I know you love me, and I love you even though you are making me finish my homework before I can play." Food became a tangible way for me to express love.

• • •

I find comfort in the fact that God also uses food to express love. And even though I am struggling to understand His love, or maybe it is because of that, I find hope in it too. God likens His love to tangible experiences. Christ declares "I am the bread of life" (John 6.35) and we are promised if we come unto Christ we will never hunger. Because bread was the staple of life in the Middle East, Christ used the food that would best help His followers understand the importance of following Him because they knew what would happen if they had no bread. He offered this promise after He fed the multitude of 5,000 with five loaves of bread and two fishes. His followers had experienced both hunger and miraculous relief from that hunger. Christ admonished: "Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were

filled" (John 6.26). And I wonder if I am asking for miracles, and God instead wants me to look for how I hungered for help and He met my needs, how He filled me with His love during difficult times.

• • •

During one conversation with my son about our differing love languages, I mentioned our morning routine and the packed lunches hoping he would see, as I had, that they were a time of togetherness—evidence of love. I left that conversation understanding that he saw food as something parents were required to give their children. But isn't it love that motivates the responsibility, especially when the offering associated with the responsibility is hard, time consuming, and not always appreciated? How does one separate the love from the obligation? I cooked thousands of meals for him because I loved him, and I didn't understand how those meals morphed into mere responsibility to him. Still, his beliefs caused me to question my parenting, examine the mistakes, and the missed opportunities to show love.

I didn't know about Chapman's book on love languages when my children were little. But even if I had, I would have thought my love was obvious, simple, easy to feel. We would eat popcorn as we played games and ice cream when we watched a movie, or we would frequently gobble up homemade cookies together after school. As I look at the five love languages now, and my five children, I can easily pinpoint four of their love languages. My oldest daughter shows love through acts of service, my middle daughter needs quality time, my youngest daughter expresses love through gifts, and my youngest son requires words of affirmation to feel loved. My oldest son doesn't easily fall into any of these categories, and I not only worry about how to reach him now, but I obsess over missed opportunities.

I think about how on a few occasions I surprised my children with a cute note with their lunch. One time, when my

daughter had a crazy obsession with SpongeBob, I wrote "SpongeBob loves you" on a heart-shaped note and tucked it in her lunchbox. Years later, when she was a teenager, that note could be seen hanging on a bulletin board in her room. Now, twenty years later, I wish I'd done less food prep and surprised my children with cute notes more often instead. I wish I had written "Your momma loves you" each day on a heart-shaped note. It seems to me my son couldn't question that. Even so, I am sure I did write him a note on occasion, and his never made it on a bulletin board. When I discuss this self-doubt with my husband, he tells me that I am being too hard on myself and that the food did mean something to them. I believe that, but I can't help but wonder if I missed a chance to show love in a different language, in a way my son might have recognized. But I also wonder, when is it the child's responsibility to recognize the love? Does my son have an obligation in that?

It was while I was praying recently for my son to feel loved that I realized how often I told God I couldn't feel His love for me, and with that, I knew it was me missing something and not God. I don't believe God minds the asking or the reassuring. Similarly, when my son asks me how I show him love, I am okay with the question. But it is the questioning of my love even after I point it out to him that creates the problem. And I imagine God is the same. Perhaps my question to God shouldn't be, "Do you love me?" when things feel difficult or the answers I want to prayers don't come; instead, I should ask, "How have you shown me love through this?" I have been contemplating the words in 1 John: "We love him, because he first loved us" (4.19). I had thought that I was doing the pursuing when I sought to love God with all my heart, might, mind, and strength and then attempted to teach that to my children. But in reality it was God pursuing me, loving me first. I don't see that when I am in the midst of hard things. I have asked my son to do hard things—eat his peas, practice the piano, pray to God—that I believed

were for his good, because I loved him. I hoped he would see the love in those things and how I loved him first. Maybe God is asking the same of me.

Even when we know how someone expresses love, it isn't always easy to accept it as love, especially when it feels contrary to how we feel love. We might believe love should only be associated with pleasant feelings and the things we enjoy. I know my food love language with my children gets complicated when I think about our dinners. Like most parents, I dreaded the "What's for dinner?" question. Sometimes it was because I didn't have a plan, but other times it was the "Not that!" response from my children. I not only saw food as a way to show love, but looking back at our dinners, my children probably think—and sometimes I wonder about this too—that I might have taken my love and my responsibility to feed them healthy meals too earnestly. I ground wheat and made homemade bread. We ate beans and vegetables and whole grains. One of my favorite meals included lentils with sautéed corn, spinach, and zucchini rolled in a tortilla. I called them lentil burritos, but at some point, one of my children nicknamed them "mental burritos" and the name stuck. That's likely a perfect commentary on their feelings about most of our dinners. And now, I imagine there were many nights my children would have preferred a bowl of Froot Loops.

• • •

When Christ declared He was the "bread of life" (John 6.35), He was teaching about His role as the Savior, but He also made this statement in reference to the manna or bread from heaven the Israelites had received while wandering in the wilderness for forty years. The manna the Israelites received was in response to their murmurings and their need to be physically fed. It came from heaven each morning, but it wasn't something they could store up for future use. The scriptures explain that

manna was also a way to humble them and test them and teach them obedience (Exodus 16). It was a daily reminder God loved them and would meet their needs. And even though their needs were met, I imagine they wanted something other than manna every day. He taught them the bread He offered was different, more sustaining than manna. Today, with the gift of being able to look back, the phrase "manna from heaven" has taken on a new meaning. It doesn't refer to the partaking of the same thing every day or a testing and humbling experience, but to an unexpected help, a comfort in difficult times. Distance and time can change perspective, and manna now means simply a manifestation of love, without the obligation of obedience.

My children are all adults now, but my need to feed them hasn't stopped. When my daughter, the one who cherished that SpongeBob note, had her first baby, she lived across the country from me. I flew out to be with her when the baby was born and stayed with her for thirteen days. She had a C-section and found it difficult to go up and down stairs. Not only did I do the grocery shopping, the cooking, and the cleaning up, but I usually carried food up to her room for her, and I would hold my grandson and chat with her while she ate. I made some of her favorite foods while I was there: banana bread, pasta fagioli soup, veggie chimichangas. On the last day I was with her, I was busily chunking a watermelon, making sure her fridge and freezer were filled with food, when her husband told me to quit working so hard, that he would take care of her, and that I should sit and hold the baby and visit with my daughter. I wanted to, but I also felt compelled to leave her with plenty of food to eat so that after I was gone so she would be able to focus on her baby, and also be reminded of my love by that filled fridge when I was no longer with her. And yet I wonder, as I think about moments like that, if my need to show love takes precedence over the thing my child needs to feel loved.

During a recent conversation with my oldest son, as I listened to what he felt like he missed as a child, we began talking about food again when he said something about children needing hugs too. I didn't think hugging and touching was absent from our relationship, but he did, and I realized his primary love language must be physical touch. My mind flooded with all the times I missed opportunities to connect our love languages. I wished I would have hugged him every time I gave him an after-school cookie; I wished I would have had an arm around him as we watched the movie with our bowls of ice cream on our laps; I wished I would have touched his shoulder when he ate pancakes in the morning, as he told me about the Star Wars Lego he built.

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I believe I compare myself too much with how others feel God's love or how I might perceive He expresses it to others. I worry when others feel His love abundantly in church or during trials, and I don't. While some might find His love through quality time or words of affirmation, I think my love language with God might be physical touch, even though it is not usually a love language I use with others. Sometimes I feel Him more when I am digging in the dirt planting a garden than sitting on a pew. Sometimes I feel His love more when I am walking in the sun than singing a hymn. Sometimes I feel Him more when I am mixing and kneading bread than hearing a sermon. But I also believe God wants me in the pew, being with others, listening, seeking to find and feel the ways His love is offered there.

As I contemplate what manna God might be providing in my life today, I think about my little grandbaby; he is often an unexpected but much needed help and blessing in my life. He is now two and a half. The other day, I was watching him. It was lunchtime, and he wanted a PB & J. He likes to open the

sandwich and lick the jam, and he knows I will load the bread with more jam when he does that. As I sat the sandwich in front of him, I tousled his hair. My grandson laughed and grabbed my hand, and I wondered—I wondered when was the last time I tousled my son's hair when I placed some food in front of him.

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Hey Google

SOONWYE LUCERO

Hey Google

This is it, the moment where all my hard work finally pays off! As I wait for my name to be announced at the graduation ceremony, my leg begins to bounce vigorously. Last week, I made sure to spell my name phonetically on the paper that was passed around in class to clarify how we wanted our names to be pronounced at our high school graduation. I wanted to make certain, in this long-awaited moment, that the visiting district member would not mispronounce my name. "Soon—why." I hate spelling my name like that because it looks like I am asking a question and it reminds me of the peculiarity of my name. But it would all be worth it to hear my name said correctly in front of all my friends and family. I take a deep breath in anticipation of my name being announced next. The moment is finally here! I look up and ready to the stand in pride as the announcer says, "Soon-Wee Lucero!" My eyes squint into a fake smile and I silently scream under my mask as I walked onto the stage.

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When I was in elementary school, I remember searching up my name on the school desktop and it popped up as "no

results," with alternate search suggestions. My name, Soonwye, was nowhere to be found.

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Each summer my family would go on many road trips. During these trips our mother would take us out of the car to walk around the gas station while my dad was filling up the car. I would always dash straight to the name keychains and frantically search all the "S" names looking for my name among them. As always, I found nothing. Undeterred, I desperately continued to search for my name at every gas station we would stop at. After all my attempts to find my name failed, I began to think that my name was not important, or that maybe I had been forgotten.

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On the first day back at school, our teacher introduced herself and put a name tag on. She then proceeded to pass out name tags to everyone in my class. She explained that we would wear them the first week back at school so we could get to know each other and learn everyone's name. I carefully wrote out my name making sure to use my best handwriting before sticking it onto my shirt. That day at school, I was by far the most popular kid as every student and even some teachers would come up to me, squint and try to say my name. They would always come up short in their pronunciation. I had to correct each and every person. I dreaded putting on my name tag each day that week.

After that year in school, I was confused about how I felt about my name. It had certainly made me popular at school, but popularity did not matter if no one could say my name correctly. I had always known the meaning of it, my parents had drilled it into my head growing up. "Your name is Hopi, and it means beautiful." But now I wanted to know more. I asked my

parents how they found my name, why they chose it, and its importance to our family. They sat me down and began to tell me a story. My mother had a dream in which her grandmother came to her saying that she would have a daughter and specified to my mom the name "Soonwye." My father said, "You must understand two things. At this time, your great-grandmother had been deceased for a long time and your mother does not speak Hopi." Nevertheless my mother had a special relationship with my great-grandmother and was elated to see her grandmother in her dream. She knew it was a special message. So upon waking, my mother wrote the name down so she wouldn't forget. "I called your grandmother to ask if she knew if Soonwye was a name and if it had meaning. Your grandmother instantly said 'Yes, it's a Hopi word meaning *beautiful*.'"

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Soonwye Lucero (enter—loading…) one page! My ward made a website that included our church Primary program and classes on it and there was my name! Soonwye Lucero, a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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In middle school I joined the cross-country team, and little did I know that this would be a decision that affected the next six years of my life. For those several years, I obsessed over running. I looked up stats, training plans, form drills, running diets, and optimal sleep time. I was number one at my middle school and high school, breaking school records and making quite an impression. Everyone in the cross-country community began to become familiar to the name Soonwye Lucero, the girl who is a super-fast runner.

In my classes, whenever we had a substitute, without fail, they would start reading down the list of names then pause

when they hit my name. The substitute teacher would take a deep breath and say Soon "wee." The class would let out a sigh and in unison say, "It is SOONWYE!" I would always let a little smile slip out because of how good it felt to be known by my name.

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Soonwye Lucero (enter—loading…) two pages! Google had filled my name with stats of track and cross-country records. Soonwye Lucero, a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and a cross-country runner.

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The summer before my junior year of high school, my family received a message from my grandpa that my great-grandma Ramona had passed away. At the time of the funeral, we made our way to Denver, Colorado. On my father's side of the family, I was nicknamed after my great-grandmother as *Ramonacita*, which means little Ramona. I never got to know her very well because she only spoke Spanish and I did not. Our encounters often consisted of me sitting and listening to whatever she wanted to say and just nodding and smiling. But according to my family, I resembled her in every way possible, especially with my persistent attitude. When she passed away, my aunt made an obituary online and filled it with many pictures of my great-grandma, and many of them included us together.

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Soonwye Lucero (enter—loading…) three pages! There were now a few sites filled with pictures with my family and grandma Ramona. Soonwye Lucero, a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a cross-country runner, and a daughter in a huge family.

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A few years ago, President Russell M. Nelson gave a talk that addressed calling the LDS church by its full name, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in part because the Church's nicknames removed the Savior's name from the title and misleadingly indicated that He is not the core of its beliefs. I thought more about this talk and how I could apply it to my own life. Many times, if I knew that I would not see someone again I would not correct them when they mispronounced my name. They would say, "Soonwēē, did I say it right?" I would just smile and nod my head, "Yep, you got it right." But by doing this I was denying what I believed in and who I was. From that point forward in my life I tried to make the conscious effort not only to use the Church's correct name, but to make sure my own name was being used correctly too.

During my senior year of high school, I was preparing to attend college, and applied for several scholarships. One was from my tribe, the Navajo Nation. To qualify, I had to dive deep into my heritage and take several language and government classes. When I received this award my tribe published a few articles, on Google, with the recipients' names and where they were attending college.

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Soonwye Lucero (enter—loading…) four pages! My name now includes a couple of articles about my involvement in the tribe and future plans at BYU. Soonwye Lucero, a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a cross-country runner, a daughter of a huge family, a Navajo tribe member, and a BYU student.

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Upon arriving at BYU, I had similar experiences as I did in my childhood. Whenever I was in a group of people, and as the organizer started to introduce everyone by name, they would pause as they tried to pronounce Soonwye. But instead of becoming frustrated that I could not fit in, I was happy to have a moment to share with other people what my name meant, where it comes from, and how I got it. I now see sharing my name as an opportunity for them to see who I am and what I believe in. Recently I had a friend tell me a quote she had read in class: "If it isn't on Google it doesn't exist." Obviously, I knew that this statement was false, but I opened my laptop and typed in Soonwye Lucero anyway. I start counting the hits on my name: There are a lot more than when I first looked up my name. I smile and let out a little laugh as I closed the laptop. I know that my name has a sacred beginning, which I have learned to gratefully acknowledge. But I also know that my name is what I make it to be.

MAGGIE PETERSEN

The Sun Is Coming Back

My first job was working in a bakery at the back of a hot dog joint, where my specialties were cookies and bagels. I'd come in once a day, put in my earbuds, and listen to music for long hours in complete solitude as I worked, kneading and mixing and baking and tasting. It was a good job, repetitive and wholesome. Not a day went by where I didn't return home bearing gifts from the reject pile. One day, though, I returned with something else.

I was scooping dime-sized domes of Nutella onto wax paper and sweating through my apron in a haze of repetition when the power went out and I realized, for the first time, I was standing in a windowless room. The light sucked from the room like the oxygen in my lungs, and a scattered whoop of voices rose in its place. I didn't understand what was happening. Just a few weeks prior, my vision had failed with a swarm of nausea and I keeled over onto the floor of my half-brother's bathroom. I thought the same had happened at the bakery and in a few moments I would blink up at the foam ceiling and fluorescents and my coworkers' panicked faces, then I'd apologize, murmur something about low blood sugar, and carry on. It has always been like this: just fainting spells, few and far between. In the

bakery that day, though, I remained standing, and my boss groaned, "Not again!" and I stood there in the opaque blackness, more conscious of the thick walls boxing me in than I ever was when I could see them.

I was eighteen at the time, working in my hometown for the summer, only one semester into college and living with my parents in Montana. It's a beautiful state—everyone likes to tell me so—with its ponderosa pines and meadowlarks and looming purple mountains. In midsummer, I'd lay supine on my family's rickety trampoline and, day or night, watch the sky. Montana's one of those organic, old-styled states: "The last best place," William Kittredge called it for its open, mostly untouched plains. For Montanans, it's a matter of pride that our skies are as clear as a freshwater lake and our water is harvested from our own reservoirs.

I think a childhood like that was wasted on me though. I'm more of an interior person—physically, mentally, and spiritually—and in my mind Montana was only beautiful in summer. Otherwise, it's a dark state, underdeveloped and isolating, and I lived out in the great plains of it, where my middle school social studies teacher would say, "It's so flat, you could watch your dog run away for miles." The winter season started early and ended late, bookended by vague weeks of spring and fall, and both were always bitterly cold. Then there'd come July and August, when our perfect big tin foil sky closed in and baked us like a potato. Wind scraped across the earth year-round, and the sky grew so thick with clouds our shadows disappeared. I spent my childhood in that underdeveloped darkness. I remember the fields across from my house would burn once a year, set ablaze by farmers to prepare for the growing season, and the smoke burned my lungs with relief. It meant the sun was coming back.

When I was a kid, I had a recurring dream about the Second Coming. I didn't have it often, only once every few years, but

the dream was the same: I wake up in my bed—whether because of a sound or a feeling, it varies—and leave my room, padding down the hallway into the living room. I find my way to the wide, north-facing window where distant, warm light pours onto the windowsill, and I'm greeted by the same sight, every time. High up and far in the sky, a personage of pure white light walks a gentle decline through the air, above the field that burns before summer. He doesn't walk toward me, but parallel to my house, toward the city, yet I feel His presence like He's in the room with me. From there the details differ depending on the dream. Sometimes, my mom joins me in the front room and watches the being walk down to earth. In another dream, my child-self kneels onto the floor and begins praying for forgiveness. Other times, it stops with the window, and I simply watch as the light of the Second Coming eases over the world like dawn and my chest aches and burns, burning even as I wake to reality. The last time I had the dream, my heart burned like a white-hot coal when I awoke, the feeling expanding and expanding like I had the universe locked in my ribcage. My body curled up around me, and I stayed like that for several long minutes before slipping back into dreamless sleep.

Of course, everything would be the same by the next morning: the world still in its fallen, dark state, the wind still beating irreverently against the house. I'd waited for the Second Coming like waiting for summer—for so long and bitterly, I doubted it would ever come.

I tell this story because it's one of the few dramatic spiritual experiences I've had in my life. God hasn't sent me many promptings worthy of showing off at the pulpit during testimony meetings. The miracles in my life are so commonplace, only hindsight betrays their silhouettes. I wish I could say that this reality hasn't tested my faith, but it has. I often can't help but wonder how I can dedicate my life to something I haven't

seen or fully understood. What is a single recurring dream in the face of an empty, seemingly random universe? No matter how desperately I want to believe my life is following a course set by the divine hand, I feel like a footnote in the eternal catalog of accidents, a prokaryotic cell riding the bloodstream of a life limitlessly larger than my own, and there is no control and no reason and no other side. There's only this.

To be honest, I'd rather be nothing than just be *this*.

I think that's why—even when my testimony is ripping at the seams—I keep on with my little worship rituals: the simple routine of prayers before meals, scriptures before bed, church before the school week, calling before extracurriculars. At the very least, it offers a degree of control and meditative healing, a soft place to lay my mind when my thoughts are otherwise prickly. I blame this habit on my mother. If there's a fight before mealtime, she has a tendency to ask the angriest person to bless the food. I *loathed* this habit of hers, mostly because I was always saying the prayer. I wanted to refuse every time, but that's a line we don't cross in our household. We don't let our passions swell so big that we're incapable of reaching out to the Spirit. Not to mention, it worked like a charm for controlling my emotions. Communicating with a higher power takes a level of humility that transcends temporal concerns. Prayer consecrates even the most meaningless, angry, depressing, confusing moments of ordinary life. Prayer is a sip of light in a windowless room. Its value in extraordinary moments pales in comparison to its value in a meaningful routine.

After all, habits are where our souls reside; I truly believe that. We absorb the identity of what we invest in, whether it be work or love, passion or beliefs—our bodies and souls are inextricably linked and, just as the body reflects the values of the soul (modesty, health, chastity), the soul reflects the actions of the body. So, is revelation solely grounded in the external influences of spirits and angels? No. I speak for myself when I say no.

Since I was eight years old, I have had the Holy Ghost confirmed to me as my companion through life, but I do not hear His voice tell me to go to church or read my scriptures, and that's by God's design. Through the Holy Ghost and daily gospel living, I have nurtured a culture inside myself that guides me toward righteousness. God may not speak to me in visions or miracles, but I have worshiped every day of my life to clear a space for Him in my heart. True, corrosion like that is painful and seemingly pointless. It's a tax of time every day for a nebulous reward, and sometimes I am ashamed of making the effort. But I would rather say a hundred prayers a day than go about my life believing that my human experience has meant nothing.

I'm familiar with a lack of consciousness and a lack of light. As for the prior, I've fainted three times in my life: once in junior high during a Family and Consumer Sciences class, once again two years later as I applied makeup before school, and once again another two years later on the floor of my half-brother's bathroom. With the perspective I have now, I blame all three blackouts on low blood sugar, a common and treatable problem. At the time, though, I had no explanation for my plunge into darkness. I felt the spiral of energy, prickle of fading senses, and the beginnings of impact as my body hit the ground, but the signs—like my miracles—were only clear in hindsight. Mostly I was confused as an imminent, originless sense of danger lit up my body and filled my heart with helium, and as I stood there, waiting for the episode to pass, I passed instead. My last full thoughts would always be *I'm fine. I'm fine. Oh, wait, I think I'm dying . . .* and then I'd go to the place of distant voices and source-less pain and sentience sloughing away like a dry scab, and in that place there wasn't enough of me to even garner the hope of waking up. I have always woken up, obviously, but someday that won't be true. Someday, I'll tear even through the blackness and emerge on the other side of the metaphysical windowpane.

In those unconscious cases, my ignorance always surprises me the most. How could I not see the signs? How could I go about my life while a sense of wrongness pressed in on every side? How did I understand myself so little I never noticed I was slipping away?

I've believed in something my entire life, but I imagine believing in nothing must feel similar. It would feel like nothing exists beyond this windowless room, and when I leave, I'll become part of that nothing, and the sum of my life will equal out to a twitch of matter and nothing more. Without the gospel, there is nothing, and there can never be more than nothing.

I have no excuse for falling into this kind of darkness. I was born into the light of the gospel; the only way I can lose it is if I flick off the light switch myself, resigning myself to that first windowless room and the cold press of this life's concrete walls. Of course, this isn't difficult. I've felt myself slipping away before, with a perfect knowledge of the consequences, and still I pushed the boundary, straying further and further from my view of God yet still asking for a small miracle. Visions, voices—I prayed for any kind of sign God would give me while I tied the veil more tightly across my eyes. I already possess the truth, all of us do, yet the keys to access it are so simple they sometimes elude my understanding. That day in the bakery, I needed only to feel my way to the door to find the sunlight. I had my consciousness and I had the knowledge that a world existed outside the windowless room. That's all I needed.

Sometimes, on those few burning nights when I dreamed of watching the Lord's Second Coming through the front room window of my Montana home, I'd wander down the hall and draw the curtains back. As I expected, only moonlight poured onto the sill, the plains stretching flat and brown and overshadowed out toward the familiar horizon. Still, I would offer a

prayer, my chest still lit up inside me, and those were the times when the spirit inside me would simmer to peace, and I'd look out with new eyes at the living, shifting plains of my childhood home. I can still picture it in my head; I can still hear the wind whistling and feel the cold pooling over the floor and see the faintest brush of dawn bleeding through the sky. The sun is coming. The sun is coming back, and I'll wait patiently for it with the light of my testimony. There's no hurry. I've collected the gospel in little sips my whole life, and I'll continue to do so with faith, because I know the Son is coming back.

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Biographical Notes

Holden d'Evegnée is a junior studying English. He grew up in Rexburg, ID, where he joined the high school debate team. After his freshman year at BYU, he served a mission in the Ivory Coast. He is currently preparing to apply to graduate school in order to study literary criticism.

Sydney Gant is from a small town outside of Nashville, TN. She is an English major with an emphasis in creative writing. She likes to play video games, read, write fiction, and cook, and has known she wanted to write since she was little—it has always been a passion of hers.

Jamie Lewis Holt is a creative writing graduate student. Many of her visionary works including fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and photography have been published in-print and on-line around the world by such places as Zimble House Publishing, Wingless Dreamer, Beyond Words, and many more. She's currently working on a fourth novel as well as another juvenile fiction novel. Jamie balances raising her five children, graduate studies, teaching, editing and publishing, a chronic illness, and various civic duties with the salvation of writing fictitious realities for readers of all ages.

Mauri Pollard Johnson is a current MFA student studying creative nonfiction and is serving as the assistant managing editor for *Fourth Genre*. She is lucky enough to have a wonderful husband who takes care of their cat, the household chores, and who encourages her to follow her dreams.

Jacob Liljenquist was raised in Bountiful, UT. Growing up his head was constantly in the clouds, but now it is constantly in the troposphere. He enjoys reading fiction, writing fiction, thinking about fiction—anything fictional, really. He also likes painting with his wife, Rachel, and watching the sun set on warm summer days. Jacob is studying history at BYU.

Alison Linnell is an MFA graduate student studying creative nonfiction. She's a Jeopardy! junkie with a weakness for Sudoku puzzles and chocolate-covered almonds. In her free time, she can be found collecting recipes she may never try, buying books she may never read, or becoming overly invested in how she could construct a swimming pool she could never afford to build in her not-so-big backyard.

Soonwye Lucero is a freshman preparing to enter the nursing program, class of 2025. She grew up in Peoria, AZ. Before coming to BYU, she worked as a licensed nursing assistant. In her free time, she enjoys spending time outside and with her friends.

Maggie Petersen is a sophomore and passionate storyteller. Throughout growing up in the Great Plains of Montana and coming to college in the midst of a pandemic, her love of writing has been a constant companion and guide. Currently she is pursuing a degree in English literary studies with plans to continue writing professionally. Her greatest claims to fame are briefly speaking to critically acclaimed writer Dr. Marilynne Robinson over Zoom and reading the entirety of *Don Quixote* in a week.

Adrienne Powell is majoring in linguistics and minoring in creative writing and ballroom dance. She has been taking dance classes since she was four and telling stories for longer than she can remember, though she didn't realize she could write them down until middle school. When she's not doing one of those things, she is usually sword fighting, making art or music, obsessing over Tolkien, or playing in the woods with her six younger siblings.

Bradley Reneer is pursuing a creative writing MFA. He worked for decades in software development and recently quit to pursue an encore career in writing. He lives in Alpine, UT, with his wife Marné. They have seven children and four grandchildren.

Fleur Van Woerkom grew up in various parts of California. Through creative writing she seeks to better understand art, family relationships, and her experiences as a missionary in New York City. Fleur is currently a student of editing, creative writing, and dance at Brigham Young University.